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BARREN CORN

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INSTEAD OF THE THORN
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THESE OLD SHADES
THE BLACK MOTH
THE GREAT ROXHYTHE
THE MASQUERADERS
BEAUVALLET

BARREN CORN

BY

GEORGETTE HEYER

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To
DOREEN

Who knows what word were best to say ?
For last year's leaves lie dead and red
On this sweet day, in this green May,
And barren corn makes bitter bread.
What shall be said ?

SWINBURNE: *Felise.*

BARREN CORN

CHAPTER I

LAURA went out into the sunlight, too hot even in her linen frock. She thought she would climb the wooded hill to the east of the town, and from that height look over Villefranche, and down at the sea, which was so blue and shimmering.

The road along the coast was dusty; she half closed her eyes against the glare. A path led towards the trees upon the slope of the hill; she toiled up it, panting a little. The trees grew more thickly, till at the summit a glade was reached. Through a leafy archway Laura could look down upon the spangled sea, and at the white town of Villefranche. It was like fairyland, she thought. Her appreciation of the scene found expression in her favourite exclamation, breathed softly between her lips.

"My!" she whispered. "If it isn't beautiful!"

She sat down under the archway, and took off her hat. There were a million stars on the water below, dancing and dazzling. Through the leaves overhead a hotter sun than she had ever known filtered through to light this shadowed glade with tiny golden rays. For the hundredth time she wondered at her extraordinary good fortune. Whoever would have thought it? she pondered. It was a far cry from Brixton to the South of France, yet here she was, and here had been for as much as three golden months, transported from a hat-shop in Regent Street to a hat-shop in Nice.

She smoothed the skirt of her frock over her knees. Her sisters had said enviously that she had always had all the luck. May had said it as though it were a grievance, but Gladys, struggling with a house and two children, had said also that Laura deserved it. It was all on account of her having gone out to France in the War, and learned to speak a little French, she said: Laura might depend upon that.

The season was over now at Nice. Several of the girls who worked in the shop had been dismissed, but Laura was not amongst them. Madame liked her; she was conscientious; she did not quarrel with her peers, and her dark beauty was a business asset to any shop. She had had experience, too: she was no flighty girl in her teens, but a woman of thirty, richly beautiful, magnificent in stature, calm of demeanour. Indeed Madame liked her, Madame with her sharp tongue, and her bright shrewd eyes. "She is a good girl, that one," Madame said. "I do not let her go." When Laura stayed away with influenza, Madame, remembering long weary days throughout the season when alone of the girls at Suzanne's Laura had neither wilted nor grown short of temper, told her that she might take a week's holiday. Since Laura knew nothing of the Riviera, and was even loth to go on holiday, Madame told her of Villefranche, and sent her away to the quiet little town with no more ado. "You are of no use to me sick, Laura," she said curtly. "Also, the season is at an end, I can spare you."

Laura had arrived at Villefranche in time for lunch. It was nicer than Nice, she thought: more beautiful, more restful.

Under the archway of leaves on the hill-top she remained for some time unaware of another's presence, but behind her, half hidden by the trees, a man was seated on a camp-stool, sketching. He had heard her approach with annoyance; when she had sat down un-

der the archway the thought in his mind was that she was in his way, but presently, having watched her, he began to paint her, and as he painted he became absorbed in her elusive personality. He saw her profile clear-cut against the blue; his admiration was fired by the full sweep of her cheek, and the queenly poise of her head. He began to weave tales about her. She seemed to him the embodiment of Italian Renaissance. He saw her as a peasant girl three hundred years and more ago, with swinging hips, and the candid eyes of innocence. There was a purity in her face that fascinated; she might have posed as a Madonna for Luini, a child in her arms.

She was a big woman, a magnificent woman, he thought. In his world women passionately denied with their straight lines their sex; this woman had generous curves, a richness of beauty that fascinated him.

She was dark, with long hair coiled tidily round her head. Her skin had a creamy whiteness under its glow of healthy colour; her eyes were hidden from him, but he could see the shadow of the lashes on her cheek.

He let his imagination play about her; presently he thought he would speak to her, when perhaps her secret personality might be discovered.

Laura became aware of his presence, and turning her head saw him against a background of green and the dull brown of tree bark. The sunlight lay on his uncovered head, making the crisp hair that was neither gold nor brown but something between the two, glint with auburn lights. In the tan of his thin restless face his eyes were startlingly blue, the blue that is unchanging and a little hard.

Ashamed to have intruded however unwittingly into his view, she began to scramble to her feet, but his voice checked her. "Oh I say, please don't move !" he called.

She stayed, hesitating. "But I'm in your way, I'm afraid ?"

He was surprised to find that she was English; he had wanted her to be Italian, but he had thought she might be French. She was more beautiful, seen full-face, even than he had expected; her smile, diffident but so gay, charmed him.

"Of course you are. I'm sketching you just as fast as I can. You've no idea how lovely your profile is against the sky." A friendly laugh accompanied the words. "Do sit down again!" he said. "I quite thought you were Italian, or at least French."

"Most people do," said Laura shyly. "Till they hear me speak French," she added. "Are you putting me into your picture?"

"You don't object?"

She stammered, blushed divinely; her eyes fell; "Oh no! I'm sure it's very nice of you. Only shan't I spoil the view?"

"You are the view," he told her, and was amused at her confused glance.

Fearing to disturb him she said no more, but sat very still, covertly watching him.

He could not be many years above thirty, she thought, although his face was curiously lined. His lips were too thin, but well curved, his teeth very even and white. The instant she had heard his voice Laura had known that he belonged to a class above her own; his dress more surely betrayed him, for he wore grey flannel trousers, not in their first youth, brown brogues, and a tweed coat. None of the men whom Laura knew could dress so negligently yet wear old clothes with this indefinable air of breed. Instinctively she knew this, and was awed.

"Are you staying at Villefranche?" he asked presently.

"Only for a week," she answered, and of impulse added; "I have to go back to Nice next Monday. I am in a hat-shop there. Madame Duhamel — she's the manageress — gave me a holiday."

"Then I'm properly grateful to Madame Duhamel," he said. "Where are you staying ?"

"At the Hôtel de l'Univers," she said.

"Good Lord, are you ? so am I ! This gets better and better !"

She did not know how to answer; she looked away across the sea. He painted on in silence, but soon flung down his brush with an exclamation of disgust. "It's no good, the fit has left me. Will you sit for me again Miss — er — ?"

"Burton," she supplied. "Laura Burton."

"Laura !" he rolled the name softly off his tongue. "It couldn't be anything else. You are the Mediæval Italian. Do you know what I was reminded of when I first saw you ?"

"No," she said, wide-eyed.

"Luini's Madonna. You know the one I mean ?"

"No, I — I don't know much about pictures," she answered honestly. She felt strange, and ill at ease, for no one had spoken to her like this before.

The young man rose from his camp-stool, and she saw that he was tall and slim. "May I come and sit beside you ? Or do you think me very impertinent ?"

"Oh no !" she said quickly, and looked up into his keen eyes, her own puzzled and humble.

He sat down under the tree, and drew out his pipe. "My name's Hugh Salinger," he told her. "And I'm trying to paint a great picture."

It was obviously a joke; she smiled, but could say nothing.

"And it isn't great," he said, with a grimace. "How do you like the Riviera ?"

"Oh, I think it's beautiful !" she replied. "Don't you ?"

"Rather like tinselled cardboard, don't you think ?"

She did not quite understand; her eyes questioned his meaning.

"Stage scenery," he said, for her further enlightenment.

"Is it ? You see, I've been to so few places it seems lovely to me." She, who knew not the meaning of the word, did not recognise the high-brow in Salinger.

"Wait till you've been to Italy," he smiled.

"I don't suppose I shall ever go there. It was great luck my getting out to Nice."

"And great luck for me that Madame What's-her-Name gave you a holiday. I was getting so bored, and you're the only English person here."

"P'raps you'd like it better at Monte Carlo or Mentone," she suggested.

"No, I'm sick of places like that," he answered. "I'm supposed to be here for my health. I've been indulging in pneumonia, which is beastly."

Her face clouded. "I know. I had a brother who died of it."

"I am so sorry. I wish I hadn't told you that."

"It's quite all right; it happened years ago. Did you have it badly ?"

"No, I only went in for the single variety. Aftermath of 'flu. My mother wanted me to go away, so here I am. Tell me about yourself. What's it like, being in a hat-shop ?"

"It's quite interesting," she said. "There's nothing to tell, nothing that would interest you, that is. Are you an artist ?"

"I try to be, but most people think not. Will you come and see the picture of yourself ?" He helped her to her feet; they went over to the easel.

The sketch betrayed the dilettante, but in Laura's eyes it was wonderful. She said so in all sincerity, and saw his face flush under the tan.

"Do you really think so ?"

"Yes, I don't know how you can do it," she said. "I do think it's pretty."

She saw at once, by his expression, that she had said something wrong, but she did not know what it was. "I — I wish I knew more about painting," she said, trying to rectify the unknown mistake. "I haven't had any opportunity of studying it, so I don't properly understand it; but I do like this picture, awfully."

"Then it's very nice of you," he said. "I don't think it's much good, myself. A certain friend of mine says that I cannot paint at all."

"But you can!" Laura said wonderingly.

"I can paint enough to amuse myself, anyway. I don't suppose I should ever succeed in selling a picture!"

He did not work, then, for his living. He was one of the Leisured Class; Laura had never imagined that she would one day meet and talk to a member of this class on equal terms. Some of the awe she felt was reflected in her face.

"May I walk back to the hotel with you?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you. I shall be very pleased. P'raps I can help you carry something?"

"That's very kind of you, but I can manage, thanks."

But she insisted on carrying some of his paraphernalia. Thus laden they set off down the hill together, talking easily in the pleasant intimacy that usually comes but after long acquaintance. When they reached the quay, Salinger said impulsively: "I say, may I give you some tea? It's beastly at the hotel, but there's rather a jolly little *pâtissier's* quite near. Do come! I'm sure you're longing for tea. I know I am."

She could not consent to this.

"I wish you would!" Salinger said, disappointed. "Why won't you?"

"It's very — kind — I think I mustn't, though. Thank you very much."

"Why not?" he asked blankly, and then realized that the invitation had shocked her respectability. Her rich beauty had caught his fancy, never very difficult

to catch. Quite absurdly he wanted to know her better, and since he had never yet denied his pleasure, he decided now that he would see more of her. She might, perhaps, when he knew her, prove disappointing; on the other hand her personality might be strong enough to sustain his interest. If it chanced thus she would be a pleasant diversion, a solace for his boredom. It was in such terms that he thought of women; to him they came as interludes, and as quickly passed.

"Look here, you're not annoyed with me, are you?"

"Oh no, how could I be?"

"That's all right then, because I do want to be friends."

"Friends?" She looked at him, and though their eyes were on a level, she felt that she looked up. "With me? But — why?"

"Don't you ever feel like that?"

"Sometimes."

"It's as though we had known one another in a previous incarnation. Do you understand? Some people you never really get to know, others you seem to know perfectly as soon as you set eyes on them."

"I don't think I've ever felt quite like that," Laura reflected.

"This is most disappointing," Hugh said. "I tell you that I seem to have known you all my life, and you reply that you never feel like that about anyone!"

She was silent.

"But you're going to be friends, aren't you?"

She paused in her walk, and let him see her troubled face. That which must be said had best be said at once. "I don't know, Mr. Salinger. You see — I'm not your class." There was an odd dignity in the way she spoke; she lifted her chin, but her cheeks were warm.

His eyebrows went up in momentary surprise. He had known many women, but never a woman like this one; he guessed what her frankness must have cost her,

and instantly responded. "My dear Miss Burton, that's quite ridiculous, believe me."

"I am a shop girl," she said steadily. "I'm not your sort."

"Does serving in a shop make you less a lady ?"

She could find no words.

"Please don't talk like that any more !" Hugh begged. "If you won't come out to tea with me, may I have mine with you at the hotel ?"

She could see no objection to this; they walked on in perfect amity.

In her letter home that evening she did not mention Hugh. Her pen was unready; she wrote stiltedly; when she tried to describe Villefranche she found it nearly impossible, for Villefranche was one with Hugh Salinger, and could not be disintegrated.

They met next morning at breakfast; he reminded her of her promise to sit for him again. She had a momentary feeling that she would be wiser to make some excuse, but her inclination led her to agree. The next day was the same, and the next. It seemed, in some vague fashion, wrong to accept Hugh's friendship, yet reason could find no harm in it. She reflected that it could only last until the end of her short holiday. They spent the morning in the sylvan spot where they had met the day before, she sitting on the ground with her hands clasped loosely before her, he painting in the background, fitfully, because there seemed to be so much to say.

"I can't do you justice !" he cried once. "And yet I thought I could paint you with my eyes shut."

The extravagance of this speech puzzled her. "I wonder why not ? I don't take well in a photograph, of course."

That amused him. "You're the most uncomplimentary person I ever met !"

She laughed. "Am I? I didn't mean to be. Why can't you paint me?"

"I don't know. I can't make it vivid enough; it seems so flat. I don't think I've got the spirit of you."

It was true; his sketch showed her features correctly, but it held none of her personality.

"Lord, what a funny thing to say!" she remarked. "What's my spirit got to do with it?"

"Everything. Come and tell me what you think."

She came, and stared at her painted image for a while in silence.

"Well?"

"I don't know, of course," she said slowly, "but it seems to me that I look kind of stupid."

"You do," he sighed. "Because I've painted your face and your body, and left out your soul. Oh damn!"

The expletive rather startled her. The men of her acquaintance were all morbidly careful to say nothing more forceful than "dash" in a woman's hearing. But since this man said it so unconcernedly, and did not think it necessary to beg her pardon, she felt that there could be nothing wrong in it.

"But how can you paint my — soul?" She was shy of using this unfamiliar word; his reference to her soul made her feel slightly uncomfortable.

"I can't," he said flippantly.

"My soul's inside me," she argued. "You can't paint what's inside a person."

"Where inside you?" he asked quickly.

"Well, it's my heart, isn't it?"

"No."

"Then I don't know. Where is it?"

"All over you. In your eyes."

"Oh, you mean my expression!"

"No; that which is behind your expression."

She did not understand; she did not know the meaning of psychology, had anyone told her she would have

thought it nonsense. But Hugh who spoke of souls, and painted them, must be incalculably clever. The admiration, almost the reverence, she felt was in her face, plain to read. He saw it, and it pleased him.

"You see," he explained, "unless I can understand your soul — that is to say, your spirit, your self — I can't paint you as you really are. Oh lord, why can't I understand it ?"

"I suppose," she said, her brain groping in unexplored regions, "it is only the people who are very near to you who can do that. Like when you meet someone you don't know what she's really like at first."

"You mean it is only love that can understand the soul ?"

"Yes — I suppose so," she said reluctantly. Then, because the conversation worried her, and seemed to her exotic, she went back to her original seat under the arch of the tree, and said briskly; "My, isn't it hot ?"

"Sweltering," said Hugh at once. "Are you really going back to work on Monday ?"

"Why, of course I am !" she replied. "I must."

"Where do you stay ?"

In all innocence she told him, told him also of her fellow boarders, of garrulous Miss Jackson who owned the pension, and of Mr. Bealby who skipped for health's sake and brought the plaster down from the ceiling of the room below him on to Miss Miller's head.

Hugh shouted with laughter and left his painting to come and hear more. "If my friend Quillinan comes out to see me I must introduce him to you," he said. "He'd love the plaster story. He's by way of being a student of human nature."

On Sunday morning, Hugh missed Laura, and learned that she had breakfasted early, and gone by train to Nice, to Church. He was impatient at losing even a few hours of her company; his absorption in her found an outlet in the writing of a letter to Quillinan.

Hôtel de L'Univers
Villefranche.
Jan. 27

My dear Maurice,

When are you going to redeem your promise? I have expected to see your burly person darkening the portal of this hostelry since the beginning of the month, and still you tarry. I suppose genius burns, and you cannot tear yourself away from the new book. But why not bring it here? You cannot pretend that Villefranche would distract you.

I am at work on a glorious piece of scenery, which I should like you to see; but oh, I am bored! Except for one girl I am the only English person here.

By the way, I should like you to meet this girl — I say "girl" but I imagine she is nearly thirty. She should interest your analytical mind. I gather that she hails from the shopkeeper class, but she is curiously unlike the average shop girl. I find it hard to describe her, which sounds as though she were pale and nondescript. She is not. I have never seen a more vivid creature. She is dark, very tall, splendidly robust, more vital, rather less refined in type, than Luini's Madonna (you know the one I mean?) but very like. I am trying to paint her, but she eludes me. I feel there are unexplored depths in her nature; I imagine her complex, intricate enough to interest even so critical a person as yourself.

You will say, "Ah, Hugh is caught again!" and in a way I suppose I am. At any rate my Laura (no name could give a better idea of her) is sufficiently fascinating to relieve my present boredom.

The weather is delightful, the hotel comfortable. Do come out, and bring me all the news. The Mater's letters are not at all illuminating, and Joyce, little beast, never writes at all. I suppose she is enjoying herself as much as ever. Mater writes that they are thinking of going down to stay with my uncle next month. She has

taken to calling Alleyne "the home of us Salingers," and seems to be entertaining some mad hope that I shall inherit. Do try and stop such talk when next you see her! Apart from the fearfulness of saying things like that, when one thinks of the haleness and heartiness of my fox-hunting, pheasant-shooting, salmon-catching, and ale-drinking cousin, the notion is too absurd! Joyce ought to have squelched it, but I find that sisters are worse than no good. Do your best!

Yours ever
H. S.

CHAPTER II

LAURA did not come back to Villefranche until lunch-time; Hugh, whose table was beside hers, looked up with a smile as she entered the room. "Either you were very early or I was very late this morning," he said.

"I was early," she replied, sitting down. "I went to Nice."

"So I was told. To Church."

"Yes."

"And I spent an unprofitable morning writing letters. May we have our last sitting this afternoon ?"

She returned a confused answer: she ought to write letters too; she was sorry; she must pack her handbag.

"Are you saying that to tease me, or do you mean it ?" he asked.

She looked up. There was dawning uneasiness in her eyes, and a faint question. His own became grave. "Please come !" he said gently. "Will you ?"

"Very well," she replied. "Yes."

She was unusually silent during the walk up the hill. Hugh fell in with her mood; it was not until they had taken up their positions on the summit that Laura's strained attitude left her.

"Is your home in England ?" she asked.

"I really haven't got a home," he said. "I'm rather a rolling stone."

"Isn't it very uncomfortable, not having a proper home ?"

"No, I don't find it so. My mother and my sister live in Hans Place, and I can always join them. But when

I'm in England I spend most of my time with my uncle. He lives down in Sussex."

"I know Sussex a little, just round Worthing."

"Alleyne is further inland, between Arundel and Chichester."

"Oh! It must be lovely."

"It's not at all bad. Elizabethan, but rather rambling and added-to. The grounds are very jolly, but the inmates are ghastly."

"Your uncle?" she asked, surprised.

"No, he's awfully decent. His son's dreadful, and so are my other cousins."

"Is your aunt nice?" she asked, thinking what a strange family it sounded.

"No, she's the worst of the lot. Oh, you mean my uncle's wife! She's dead. His sister keeps house for him. She's a widow with two appalling children. We're rather a queer family, you know. My mother and aunt are widows, and my uncle's a widower."

"How funny!"

"It is, isn't it?"

He worked for a while in silence, brows puckered. Then he drew back and looked at the sketch with half-closed eyes. "Mm. Now come and look."

She came, and dutifully admired. It was lovely, but she did not think she could be as nice-looking as that.

"Don't you ever look in your mirror?" he asked.

"Of course, when I do my hair."

"Very well then!"

She shook her head. Quite suddenly he rose, and took her hands. "You are the most beautiful thing on God's earth," he said. "Don't go tomorrow!"

Her hands fluttered; a quiver ran through her; the colour sprang to her cheeks, but her eyes looked forth unfalteringly. "I must go back."

"No, no! Don't go! Stay with me! I—my God, how lovely you are!"

"I don't know what you mean!" Strange forces were at work within her; her fingers clung, unconsciously; life held no more than this blue-eyed man before her.

"Stay with me!" he repeated, and bent his handsome head over her hand. His hot lips seemed to scorch her palms, his touch set her throbbing. She held him away from her, and faltering said: "No, no! You don't know! I'm — I'm not your sort; you can't love me!"

"By God, I do!" he said thickly, and swept aside the feeble barrier of her hands, and caught her all warm and vital into his arms. Their lips pressed hard against each other; she was sobbing beneath her breath, swamped by a great wave of passion. Hugh's kisses fell on her wet eyelids, and her parted lips; she was conscious only of joy, and breathless happiness coming as balm after troubled nights, and the pain of uncertainty.

In that first kiss she gave her heart into his keeping. It seemed that she had found the one man in all eternity whom her soul could love. It was for this, then, that she had kept her heart inviolate; all these years she had waited for the dream lover; deep within her she had known, when first she saw him, that all dreams had come true. Her practical, everyday self had doubted, and chidden romance; misery, the causeless misery that only love knows, had laid grey fingers over her horizon, but Hugh kissed her, and all doubts fled.

She remained submissive in his arms a little while, but the halcyon moments passed. She pulled herself away, covered her face with her shaking hands. "Oh no, no! It's not right — ! You can't marry me, my dear, my dear!"

She did not see, she only felt, his quick recoil. Her instinct knew the truth. Her hands fell, her brimming eyes sought Hugh's face, full of startled horror, and a great shame. Before that look his own eyes wavered. He took a step forward, hasty words of explanation on

his lips. She turned, caught up her hat from where it lay upon the ground, and went swiftly away, almost running through the trees.

He stayed for some time, staring at the spot where she had so lately been. He still could feel the imprint of her warm lips on his, and the confiding touch of her hands on his shoulders. But a minute back she had lain in his arms, without struggle or misgiving; now she was gone, so quickly that he had no time to stop her, or collect his racing thoughts.

Annoyance surged up in him, with her, with himself. What a scene! How ridiculous she had been to run from him so precipitately! How ridiculous to suppose he could mean marriage! He saw again the stricken look on her face, and at once he was sorry, and nearly started in pursuit of her.

He checked himself, and went slowly to his easel, and sat down before it. He felt that he had made a fool of himself; hers was the blame. The thing had best end now; he had lost his head, overcome by her near presence, and a mad desire, which her glorious beauty had awakened in him. He cursed himself for his folly; looking back, his behaviour seemed that of a cad, for he had known that Laura was not a light woman, nor even a flirtatious woman.

Yet she had not denied him. He would not easily forget the tenderness in her voice, nor the look of happiness in her eyes.

A revulsion of feeling came. Poor girl, poor girl! He knew himself to be unworthy; he could find it in his heart to be sorry he had crossed her path. He wished that he could comfort her, at least beg her pardon; perhaps, he knew not how, make amends for his unspoken insult.

But marriage! It was inconceivable, impossible. He thought of his mother, and his sister, and the dead ancestors who looked down from the walls of Alleyne, and

in imagination he placed Laura beside them, born of tradesmen, speaking their language, imbued with their ideals. Better a painted flower from the Chorus, with lax morals and frank vulgarity, than this girl of strict upbringing, and the faint flavour of gentility.

He was forced to admit that in some ways she was above her station. She bore herself queenly; her voice was low and rich, without any trace of accent. It was only occasionally that her speech or her actions betrayed her. Herself had known what gulf of Caste lay between them; herself, in a spirit of proud humility, had forced him to look on this difference in their estates. How many girls in her position would have done the same? Not one, he thought. She aped no well-bred manners, yet was she not sufficiently intelligent to acquire the manners of his order?

Until this moment no thought of marriage had entered his head; he banished it now, seeing in it too many pitfalls and disasters for one of his indolent nature to overcome.

From birth onwards circumstances had spoiled him. The premature death of his father had deprived his childhood of discipline or example. His mother, heedless and frivolous, had never learned even to discipline herself. She treated her children as playthings that soon bored her; the only example she set her son was one of extravagance and irresponsibility. Ever since he could remember she had been to a great extent dependent on his uncle, the Tenth Baron Salinger, to whose care her husband had commended her and her two children.

Lord Salinger confessed himself putty in the hands of a pretty woman, and Emmeline was a very pretty woman, blessed with easy tears, and an ethereal, tired voice. Her expenses were large, her debts numerous; she was fortunate in the possession of a brother-in-law who disliked a business brain inside a woman's head, and who understood only too well how swiftly money ran

through one's fingers. He was never shocked by a tale of losses at Bridge; the recital of a dressmaker's importunities always brought forth his cheque book, for he liked women to be expensively clad. He had neither wife nor daughter to clothe; his sister, Lady Powis, was the most practical of women, and was mostly to be seen in tweeds, and stout shoes, and an ancient felt hat. Lord Salinger delighted in encouraging Emmeline in her extravagance. He was always pleased when Mrs. Salinger came to stay at Alleyne, and it was one of the few points where his strong-minded sister had to give way to him. She cherished little affection for Emmeline; more than once she had insinuated that this butterfly woman was shrewder than his lordship imagined, and extracted money from him in a most clever way. But Salinger, who never imagined virtue in anyone until it was forced upon his notice, only chuckled, and remarked that he had never known a woman who was not clever at getting what she wanted out of a man.

So Mrs. Salinger, her daughter, and her son had to be endured, willy-nilly, even welcomed. Lady Powis realized her own position too keenly to attempt the exclusion of this tiresome younger branch.

The late Sir John Powis had managed his monetary affairs so ill that his wife could hardly afford to educate her children, and to set up what she considered to be a suitable establishment for herself. The children were a girl and boy, James and Hylda, for whom Salinger liberally provided. Jim was at Eton, and Hylda, whom her uncle would willingly have spoiled had she been in the least pretty or attractive, was at Girton. So far from wishing to be dependent on Salinger, she could talk of nothing but the New Woman, and her Right to Support Herself.

There remained Salinger's son Roland, and in him he took a certain amount of pride, but the fundamental difference in their natures prevented the exchange of any

very deep affection or understanding between them. Salinger, fond of alluding to himself as one of the World's Black Sheep, had little interest in the World's Saints. He spoke thus of Roland, and added a rider to the effect that Roland was not a Salinger, either in appearance or at heart, but favoured his mother's family, who were all blameless and brainless. Roland was a slow-witted young man who always knew the correct thing to do or say in any circumstance. Vice in any form was described by him as Bad Form, and therefore impossible to contemplate. He was a good sportsman, he would make a good landlord, and his friends were all unquestionably Good Form. People liked him, for he was pleasant, and kind, and always polite. But his rigid standard of Good Form made him some enemies, for his judgments went not only by character but by outward appearances, and the man who wore a soft evening shirt, or let his hair grow too long, or confessed to a lack of interest in horseflesh, he pronounced Bad Form. He knew no worse epithet; it spelled Hell and Damnation.

And there was Hugh, every inch a Salinger, in whom a fine seat on a horse was compatible with a certain eccentricity which Roland labelled severely, Highbrowism.

Salinger was very fond of Hugh. He sent him to Eton, where he was a little junior to his cousin, and to whom he caused the maximum amount of annoyance. For he laughed at the fetish of athleticism, and snapped his fingers in the face of Roland's heavy, time-honoured arguments in defence of Games and Sport. Hugh, who might, had he exerted himself, have won a place in the House Fifteen, instead carried off the Morrison Prize for Greek Verse, and associated with all the weirdest people in the House. Roland attributed the selection of his friends to the Greek verse, and since he could understand neither looked on both darkly.

Hugh's House-master thought that he lacked "stabil-

ity," and wrote as much on his reports. Salinger was amused, and continued to encourage Hugh in his precocity. Appeals from Mrs. Salinger to control her son met with the unvarying response that he was only a looker-on, and preferred not to jeopardize the friendship that existed between himself and Hugh by meddling in the boy's affairs.

So Hugh was allowed to go his own road, and Salinger continued to regale him with stories of his youth, of which his son disapproved, and which, for obvious reasons he could not tell to the women of his family.

By dint of a little application Hugh might have obtained a scholarship at Oxford, but since he had never been taught to think the acceptance of his uncle's generosity degrading, and therefore saw nothing shameful in subsisting entirely upon it, such an idea never entered his head. He took it for granted that Salinger would send him to Oxford, and of course Salinger did send him, and, further, placed at his disposal an allowance that did nothing to promote the feeling that he was not a millionaire's son.

Hugh's tastes were expensive: Salinger liked him the better for that; he must drink vintage wines, and go to the best tailor; he must indulge his craving for rare editions, and old prints. He soon found himself in debt; application to his mother elicited no more than a plaintive letter explaining her own difficulties. He thought it the most natural thing in the world to write to Salinger, who sent him a cheque at once, and desired to know no more about it.

Lady Powis, jealous of the favour shown to Hugh, and guessing that he received considerable sums from his uncle, ventured to expostulate.

"Leave the boy alone, Lilian," said Salinger. "You don't understand him. I do."

She remarked that this lavish generosity was the worst training for a boy whose inheritance was small, and who

must necessarily make his own way in the world.

"He's not a beggar," Salinger replied. "And nor am I."

"That's all very well," said the lady, "but Hugh will hardly be able to live in the style you are encouraging him to live in now."

"He's provided for," was all Salinger would say.

Hugh came down from Oxford with a Pass Degree, and a certain measure of renown as the founder of a new periodical (which flourished for two years, waned, and then withered), and an exclusive society whose members discussed every form of art with jejune brilliancy and much bombast.

"You're becoming rococo," said Salinger critically. "Like to travel a bit, or have you other ideas ?"

He had asked the same question of his son, remembering the joyous days of his own wandering, but Roland, on whom a sense of responsibility sat heavily, chose to stay at home. It was otherwise with Hugh. He would love to travel; he had thought of it for some time. He thanked Salinger, but coolly, for Salinger represented to him one whose business it was to provide for him. This pleased Salinger; he did not like profuse gratitude; moreover, Hugh's careless acceptance of his bounty tickled his sense of humour. The advice he proffered on the eve of Hugh's departure was worldly and shrewd. It contained warnings against women with red hair, and considerable knowledge of nearly every European capital. "Don't make a fool of yourself," he said cryptically. "And don't let any of the women you'll meet cheat you into marrying them. I know 'em, little bitches !"

But Hugh's travels soon came to an abrupt end. Within six months Europe was plunged in War, and Hugh came back to England in a hurry, and procured a commission.

The æsthete in him was shocked by the ugliness of War, but it survived, and when the four years were over he returned with a Military Cross to his credit, two wounds, and a slim volume of War Poems of the modern school, published during the wave of poetic ardour which came at the end of the War.

Salinger continued to be amused, and offended the poet by prophesying that the slim black volume would find its way to the literary dust-heap.

Hugh's second book found no publisher. After a period of indecision he announced that he would like to study Art. He went to Paris for this purpose, but Art was not the only thing he studied there. The allowance he received from Salinger, coupled with his patrimony (not quite so slender a sum as his mother considered it) made him independant; he contrived to enjoy life to the utmost; he denied himself nothing.

Women played on the surface of his life; none of those with whom he had intercourse awoke more than a fleeting passion in him; he took them in his stride, left them quickly behind, and, while they lasted, kept them discreetly in the background. This Salinger approved. Disgrace lay not in intercourse with these women of the half-world, but in the bringing of them into public notice.

"Treat an *affaire* lightly," said Salinger, "and never let it intrude into your real life. Above all, never be so blatant in your amours as to incur the disapproval of Society. These things are ignored, my dear boy, for just so long as you relegate them to their proper niche in your life. There must never be a breath of scandal, so leave married women alone."

Hugh had acted upon this advice. Women were a part of life, but only a small part. He would settle down one day, having sowed his wild oats, and marry, a woman of his own class, and beget children. And there

would be nothing more on his conscience than a few indiscretions, natural to a man of his temperament, and of his set.

There was a bride marked down for him by his mother: Stella Hepplewhite, whom he had known for many years. The Hepplewhite estates marched with Salinger's; Stella would bring a fair dowry with her, breed, and slender loveliness. Lady Powis thought of her as Roland's bride, but Roland seemed to have no notion of marriage, least of all with Stella.

She was Hugh's friend since the beginning of time. They had played and quarrelled together as children, when Roland had felt, too acutely to join them, the dignity of his position as a public schoolboy. She looked up to Hugh adoringly then; still she looked up, but now she hid her adoration. He knew nothing of it. Sometimes, after three glasses of champagne, he thought of her sentimentally, but more often he took her for granted, her sympathy and her companionship. It would be a poor world without Stella, but she was not all the world.

All the world at this moment seemed to be centred in Laura. More than ever, since she had fled from him, did he want her; almost he threw the sketch he had made of her into the sea, because it contained so little of her personality.

He jumped up, collecting his easel and paints, and set off down the hill to the town, not knowing what he would say when he found Laura, but determined that he must see her, and speak to her.

He was met by the intelligence that she had left the hotel, and gone back to Nice.

CHAPTER III

HUGH wrote Finis to that episode. He would have done his best to reassure, he would have apologized, but Laura had fled. He shrugged his shoulders, then, and with easy fatalism said, Kismet!

He believed that she had left so little impression on his sensibilities that he could bear to go next day up to the hill to the leafy archway, and work at his picture. He came there, and looked about him with a half-smile. Yet when he sat down before his easel desolation seemed to descend like a pall on the place. The sun shone as it had shone yesterday, but with what a difference! The very leaves above his head seemed to whisper "Laura! . . . Laura!" When he raised his head he could hardly believe that he would not see her, seated by the old gnarled tree, with her sweet face turned towards him. The spot was barren; the spirit of the wood had changed. The shadows that had been warm and full of comfort were now grey ghosts on the ground. Beneath, the waves lapped sorrowfully along the shore, murmuring of spoiled hopes, and loneliness. All happiness was gone; only dead dreams remained: Laura's dreams, of which he guessed.

His face darkened; he stared slowly round him, half scornful, half puzzled. He tried to shake off his melancholy, and laughed at it, remembering that little more than a week ago he had not known of Laura's existence.

But he could not paint today; he felt that he would never finish this portrait.

"Oh lord! I'm getting maudlin!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I'll go on to Monte Carlo."

The week in Monte Carlo wrought no change in him. His thoughts returned always to Laura, and since she was denied him the hunger to possess her grew more fierce, until it became almost unbearable. He went to Rappallo; her image followed him; night and day he saw her shamed eyes. She became an obsession; one instant he wondered whether he would not go back to England, and leave his madness behind in this land of enchantment; the next, he felt he could not leave the Riviera knowing her to be at Nice.

Maurice Quillinan wrote that his affairs would not permit him to leave England after all. That distraction, then, was denied him. If Maurice had been able to come now it was possible that his sane presence might have helped Hugh to forget, at least to look on the episode sensibly. But Maurice would not come; there was nothing for him to do but think of Laura; everything conspired to throw him into her arms.

When it was that he first began to consider marriage he never afterwards knew. The idea must have formed in his subconscious mind, tentative and nebulous; one day he realized that it had been there for some time, slowly revolving. It frightened him; he tried to banish it, but his brain crept back to it always, like a moth to the flame of a candle.

He was really very unhappy. He could see no way out of his difficulty that would give him Laura and yet not bind him to her. He wondered what her thoughts were now. He knew that she had loved him; whether she still loved, or whether her love had turned to hate he could not know, but he was sure that she would love again if he went to her. He felt that she held him on the chain of her love; irresistibly she was pulling him back to her; gradually he came to believe that the feeling he had for her was also love, real love that wanted to possess her in all honour.

Still struggling against what he felt must be his folly

he dwelt deliberately on the thousand little common ways that were hers, and the ignorance, and the gentility. When she ate she closed her lips on the fork and drew it slowly from her mouth; she held her knife wrongly; she crooked her little finger when she poured out tea. But these minor faults might easily be corrected, he thought. If he married her he would live abroad with her until he had overcome these failings. He was sure that he could do it; he did not realize that the love which could want to change Laura was not enduring, but had in it something lacking. He would mould her aright, and when it was done he could have no more stately bride, none more beautiful. His mother would be shocked, no doubt, but if the Laura he presented to her was a polished Laura, a creature made perfect, Mrs. Salinger would soon forget the accident of her birth. After all, there was no reason why she should ever be told of it. Laura was sufficiently intelligent to mend her common ways; once removed from her present environment the thing would be easy to accomplish. It might take time, but there were no calls on him from home, and he could stay in France as long as he liked.

He would not be the first man to marry beneath him; he could think of many such marriages that had run smoothly. It was not as though she were a *demi-mondaine*, or even a girl such as some he called to mind, whose vulgarity was indelibly stamped upon them. Laura had the instincts of a lady; with a wry smile he supposed she would speak of herself as refined.

For a moment he wondered how his uncle would receive Laura; then he thought how Salinger would only laugh at this, his nephew's latest freak. There was Lady Powis, though, and his sister. The conjecture as to how they would treat Laura was unpleasant, so he put it from him, telling himself that no one should be able to

find fault with Laura when he had polished her, and taught her how to hold her own in any society.

As he pondered the matter, finding answers to every difficulty, the more possible it became, until the day dawned when he had smoothed away all obstacles from the path of his desire.

The precipitancy of this marriage occasioned him no misgivings. Everything he had done in his life he had done of impulse. He did not trouble to question the wisdom of proposing marriage upon a week's acquaintance. He felt he knew all of Laura that was necessary; a renewal of their intimacy on friendly terms alone was impossible; he knew that since he had allowed his passion to run away with him on that fatal day it must be all with her or nothing. He chose that it should be all.

Meanwhile Laura had gone back to the old world. A god had raised her to ideal heights, and had allowed her one peep of a happiness greater than any she had ever thought to know. Then he had let her fall, and life held no more than the memory of a week wherein all dreams came true.

She set her teeth bravely, and as bravely smiled, but the shadows crept into her eyes. She had told her sister Gladys once that if ever she gave her love she could never take it back, come what might. She knew now how true this was; the god had feet of clay, but love went on.

"It was my fault," she thought. "From the very first it was my fault."

She did not seek excuses for Hugh; they were not necessary. Whatever he was she loved him; she could not think him to blame. It was she who had made herself cheap in his eyes; she had not expected him to offer marriage: her thoughts had not travelled so far, but even if she had speculated on the Afterwards she would not have hoped for that, nor even for an answering love

in him. That he had offered another, vile thing, was bitter pain, but it could not kill love.

She lay awake at night, unable to sleep for thought of Hugh. She felt she must be mad to allow her heart to be so swiftly stormed; sometimes, to hurt herself, she tried to think Hugh base and hateful. Perhaps she was but one of many in his life. Then let her despise him, let her loathe him ! She could not; all her heart was his. If she slept she dreamed his arms about her, and woke with the tears wet on her cheeks because it was not so.

She started up in bed, with clenched hands and panting bosom. "If he is horrible why do I love him ?" she asked of the compassionate dark. Then she sank back on to her pillow, and weeping said: "It is not what he does, or even what he is. It is something in him and something in me, something no one can understand, that makes me love him, holds me !"

At the shop they looked at her askance. Madame frowned, and shook her head. The holiday seemed to have done Laura rather harm than good. What ailed her ?

Laura answered "Nothing." She was very well. Yes, she had enjoyed the rest. No, she was not tired.

"I believe you're struck on some man," said Florrie Hope jeeringly.

Laura flushed and turned away. Greedy eyes followed her.

"*Dis-donc, chérie,*" coaxed Madeleine. "You have an *amant*, is it not so ?"

"Good lord, what next !" Laura scoffed. "So likely I'd pick up an *amant* in a week, isn't it ?"

She returned from the shop alone one evening to find Miss Jackson awaiting her in a pleasurable state of excitement. Laura asked her listlessly what had happened.

"You go up and look in your room !" said Miss Jackson mysteriously. " 'Well,' I thought, 'did you ever ?'

'Fancy her keeping it so dark!' I said to myself. Well, what I mean is, now that I've seen him — well, I must say it gave me quite a turn, him being so good-looking and all, and giving me such a nice smile as he did. 'I'm sure you're Miss Jackson,' he said. 'Yes,' I said, 'I am.' Though who he was I hadn't the *remotest!*"

Laura stood very still in the shadow by the door. Something seemed to rise up within her, and choke her. "What do you mean?"

"Ah, that's telling, isn't it? But you won't take me in again in a hurry! 'Is Miss Burton in?' he said, and then, of course I knew it was you he wanted. You could have knocked me down with a feather! 'No,' I said. 'She doesn't get back till dinner.' Well, I mean, you don't, do you? All I can say is I wish you could have seen his face. Disappointment wasn't the word for it. 'Oh!' he said. Just that, you know, but I could tell what a blow it was to him from the way he spoke. 'Is there any message?' I said. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'll write a note.' Of course I showed him where the writing table was, and he sat down at it, and I'm bothered if all the notepaper hadn't gone. It's that Miss Dutton, *I* know! I've had my eye on her for some time. Well, naturally I said I'd run and get some more, but 'No,' he said, 'it's all right. I can manage.' And before I had time to say anything he pulled out his pocket book, and began to write in it with a fountain pen. I just waited, of course, and then he tore out the sheet, and folded it into one of those little screws — you'll see it when you go upstairs — and gave it to me. 'Would you please give that to her when she comes in?' he said. And then he handed me the flowers — there now, if I haven't let the cat out of the bag, and I meant it to be a surprise! — well, anyhow he handed me the most lovely bouquet of carnations. 'How beautiful!' I said, or

something like that, I don't quite remember what, for really I was so taken aback. And there was Mrs. Miller, listening hard all the time, and peeping over her book. For, you know, I never saw a more distinguished-looking man, and I don't suppose she had either. Anyway, there it was. 'I'll call back about half-past seven,' he said. So I just nodded, and 'Very well,' I said, 'I'll tell her.' " She paused for breath. The blood sang in Laura's ears. "Well, what do you think of *that ?*"

Laura looked at her, almost dazed. She walked forward, pale and trembling. She felt she could not bear to see Hugh; it was better by far that they should not meet again.

"My dear, you do look queer !" exclaimed Miss Jackson. "I do hope I didn't do wrong ?"

"No — no ! You said — he was coming back ?"

"Half-past seven or thereabouts, he told me. But if you don't want to see him, Miss Burton, it's easy enough for the girl to say you're engaged, or gone out, or something. Only I thought he had such a way with him. However, handsome is as handsome does, as they say, and I've often heard that the fascinating ones are the worst. Don't you fret, my dear, the girl shall say you're out."

Laura pulled herself together. It would be an easy way out of the difficulty, but it would mean Hugh's humiliation; she could not treat him so. "Of course I'll see him. I was only surprised. I didn't expect . . ."

"Well, if you're *sure* — !"

Laura went to the stairs. "Yes, he's a friend of mine."

"Ah !" said Miss Jackson darkly. "*Ah !*"

The flowers lay on Laura's bed, masses of blood-red carnations, veiled by green fern leaves; and white ones, sweet-scented, soft as snow. She touched them with unsteady hands; they were so precious since they came

from her love. The note was beside them; she unfolded it, and for a moment dared not read the hastily written words.

"*I must see you; there is so much to explain. I want to beg your forgiveness — I implore you, let me see you! I have been miserable — I behaved to you like a cur! I cannot write all that is in my heart: I shall come back this evening. If you are too disgusted with me to see me I don't know what I shall do. I love you. I can think of nothing else. Hugh.*"

She pressed the note to her lips. How good he was! How dear! Again and again she read the few lines. "*I love you. I can think of nothing else.*" She saw herself a common girl, just a shop assistant, far beneath him, but raised to heights she would remember all her life because he had said: "*I love you.*"

The note was folded tenderly, tucked away in the front of her dress, near her heart, that seemed to beat more strongly for its presence.

She had hardly had time to bathe her face and tidy her hair when the maid came to her to say that M. Salinger was in the salon. Laura went slowly down. Everyone was there, awaiting the ringing of the dinner bell: Mrs. Miller, exchanging significant glances with Miss Dutton; the Crosbys, awed into silence; Mr. Beeson, casting supercilious looks towards the figure by the window.

Hugh stood with his back to the room, staring out into the street. He was dressed as Laura had never seen him, in navy blue serge, silk socks which matched his tie, and a silk handkerchief of the same colour tucked into his breast pocket. He turned as Laura came in, and she saw that his face was stern, and rather pale. Conventionally he held out his hand. "How do you do?" Under his breath he said urgently — "Will you go and put on a hat? We can't talk here."

She knew not what to say; she was conscious of straining ears all around them.

"Laura — Please do as I say ! There's nothing to be afraid of."

She flushed, and raised her trusting eyes. "No. I'll do as you wish. Will you — will you wait ?"

He nodded; she hurried away.

They went out presently together. He took her hand. "You'll come with me and have dinner ? Some quiet place. I forgot about your work."

"Mr. Salinger — I would rather not. There's — there's nothing to be said. I can't — I can't — "

"That means you can't forgive me ?" he said quickly.

"Oh no, no ! Of course I forgive — How could you think — It was my fault !"

"Ah, you dearest of women !" he whispered. "I hardly dared to hope that you would even speak to me again. I've been in hell. I've come to ask you to marry me."

She cried out at that, and pulled her hand away. "No, no ! You don't know what you're saying, my dear ! I can't let you do that."

He made no reply, but called to a passing cab, and told the man to drive to a small restaurant in the Avenue de la Gare. "Get in, Laura," he said authoritatively.

She obeyed him, but when the cab started, and Hugh would have taken her in his arms, she held him from her, dumbly shaking her head. His hands clasped hers caressingly.

"What is it, my beloved ? Why are you so frightened of me ?" he asked gently.

"It is not that," she said. "It is that I can't marry you. It's impossible."

"You don't love me ?"

She did not answer; it was so hard to deny her love.

"You do, Laura, you do ! There is no reason on this earth why you should not marry me."

"You don't know, you don't realize ! You mustn't marry a girl like me ! Mr. Salinger, you're a — gentleman. I'm — I'm not — a lady."

He caught her hands to his lips. "By God, you are !" he swore.

"You know I'm not. I should spoil your life."

"If you don't marry me you will spoil it indeed !" he said fiercely. "I have been looking for you all these years, and you talk of spoiling my life ! I love you ! I love you !"

The cab drew up. Hugh helped Laura to alight, gave the astonished driver a fifty-franc note, and led Laura into the little restaurant. He chose a secluded table in the corner, almost hidden by a screen; they sat down; impatiently Hugh ordered dinner, and turned again to Laura, seeing for the first time her face in the full light. Over the table his hand took hers, comfortingly. "My darling, you've been crying." There was so much tenderness in his voice that she had to bite hard on her lip to keep back a sob. "Were they for me, those tears ?" Then as still she did not answer; "I have felt like crying this past month. I cannot live without you."

"No, no, you can ! you must !"

"Have I not tried ? Everywhere I see your dear face; my arms ache to hold you."

"Not really — oh, not really ! You don't need me. You'll learn to forget — to forget you ever saw me."

"Shall you forget ?" he said swiftly.

"Not — forget. Grow — used to it."

He released her hand. "Ah, how can you talk like that ? It's not so with me ! If you send me away now you break my heart ! There is only you in all the world. My God, how can I make you understand ?"

The waiter came back with the hors d'œuvres; he handed Hugh the wine list.

"N-nothing for me, please," Laura said shakily.

"Nonsense, sweetheart; it'll do you good. A bottle of Number Sixteen, please."

"*Bien, m'sieur.*" The waiter departed. Hugh turned to Laura.

"When will you marry me?"

"Never," she faltered. "Please, please don't ask me! Oh, Mr. Salinger, I know it's wrong!"

"Don't call me that! Say Hugh. Laura dear, say it!"

"No." She shook her head. "I can't."

"If you knew how I have longed to hear it on your lips! How can I make you believe that I love you? Should I have come to you if I didn't care?"

"It won't — last."

He was indignant; a frown came. "Why should you think me so fickle?"

"Oh, I don't, I don't! Only you'll get over it. People do. And you'll be glad — *glad* that I wouldn't marry you!"

Her eyes shone liquid and dark in the rose-shaded light; she had never appeared more beautiful than now, when she sat drooping before him, with despair in her face, and entreaty. Hugh thought of her as lost to him; his hot love tried to reach her, and seemed to fall back from the armour of her resolve. He made a hopeless gesture with his hand. Words would not come; his head was bowed, his face very white; his fingers moved restlessly on the table.

She felt her resolution fail before the hopeless look on his face. She gave up the attempt to eat, pushed her plate from her, and laid her cold hand on his.

"Don't! oh, don't!" she said brokenly.

"I can't live without you. . . ."

"Think, dear! You're not yourself! You haven't known me long enough — Another month and you'll think differently. I can't — I can't be a companion to

you. I'm not clever; I don't know the things you know. I don't even speak well. You'd be doing wrong to marry me." She pressed her hand to her heart. "I feel it here. I know it."

"If you loved me you wouldn't talk like that." He did not raise his head.

That hurt her. But if he would think that, she must say nothing to convince him of her love. It was better that he should think her cold.

"I *want* you!" he said. "I have never wanted anything so terribly before. All this month I haven't known how to exist. I've dreamed of you in my arms, and when I woke there was only — loneliness. Oh, my God, don't send me away! What do you suppose there is left for me in life if you send me away?"

"You'll meet another woman — a lady — one day."

He threw up his head, and she saw his face wild and distorted. "If you send me away I shall blow my brains out!" he cried.

She shivered, but she did not believe that he would do that; it was an outburst only, yet his face frightened her. She could not hurt her love like this. Two diners, passing out of the room, peeped curiously round the screen and were gone. Laura looked into Hugh's haggard eyes, her own wide and apprehensive. There was a long silence. Laura saw Hell open at her feet, a yawning cavern wherein lay Damnation, but across the Pit it was as though Hugh's arms were stretched out to her, in desperate entreaty.

"Take me then," Her voice was steady and very low. "As you wanted me — that day."

As, slowly, he realized all that she offered, he drew back, amazed and speechless. He tried to read her downcast face; dimly he was aware of her sacrifice, and the cost of it. A wave of self-hatred swept over him; for a fleeting instant he saw his soul stripped bare of all shame, and knew himself unworthy. All that was good

in him, all there was of unselfishness, rose up and swamped the egoism. Very gently he kissed her hand, holding it long against his lips. "No. I won't take you like that. I want you for my wife. It is as my wife that I think of you."

She quivered, and a great sigh shook her; she spoke his name. "Hugh . . . Oh, my dear!"

"Laura . . . !"

The waiter came round the corner of the screen, and coughed, putting fish down before them. They paid no heed; when he had gone Laura asked shyly: "Your mother — your sister — What will they say?"

"My mother," he answered radiantly, "will say what I say now: I have chosen a queen."

She smiled, but there was sadness in her smile. "I will try so hard to make you — proud of me."

"There is no need," he said huskily. "I am proud."

CHAPTER IV

LAURA insisted that the wedding should not take place for a month, and that no announcement until then should be made of their engagement. Hugh, in his impetuosity, was impatient of what seemed to him unnecessary delay; he wished to go to the Consulate at once to make arrangements. Laura, acutely conscious of the shortness of their acquaintance, felt that a month at least must elapse before they spoke of actual marriage. She still could not think herself a fit bride for Hugh; she feared that a month might bring about a change in his feelings. Her simplicity prevented her from seeing that to behold her, as it were, at arm's length, would only enflame Hugh's ardent desire. Scarcely a day passed when she did not see him; he showered gifts upon her; he never parted from her without longing for this month of probation to pass.

In the eyes of her fellow boarders Laura had become a personage of importance. Hugh's slightly arrogant bearing, his good-looks, even his tailoring, all impressed Miss Jackson's guests. Many comments were made behind Laura's back; Mrs. Miller opined that no good could come of it; Miss Dutton remarked that she had always mistrusted Laura, knowing that the quiet ones were often the worst. Hugh's frequent visits to the *pension* excited curiosity and some unkind speculation. Mrs. Miller, having discovered his name, took down the ancient *Who's Who* from the shelf and read to Miss Dutton and the Crosbys, with much relish, all there was there that concerned the Salinger family. "Salinger — Here we are! 'Charles Humphrey Fordyce Salinger, Tenth Baron — ' Did you ever?"

"Good gracious, then he's *Lord* Salinger?" gasped Mrs. Crosby.

"No, he can't be that," said Miss Dutton briskly, with an air of infallibility. "That *Who's Who* is a 1900 one. Probably Mr. Salinger is the son."

"He would be the Honourable in that case, wouldn't he?" said Mrs. Crosby.

"Sometimes," answered Miss Dutton repressively.

Mrs. Miller settled her spectacles more securely. "Dear me, yes, it says quite a lot. 'Born in 1862' — oh well, it can't be this one, can it? Let me see, I was born in — um, um, yes. He'd be about sixty-five now."

Miss Dutton became impatient. "Of course it's not this one! Let me have a look!"

Mrs. Miller had no intention of relinquishing the book. "'Heir, the Honourable Roland Geoffrey Charles Fordyce Salinger. Born in 1892.' Do you know, I should have said he was younger than that?"

"I happen to know," said Miss Dutton, with a little superior smile; "that this man's name is Hugh."

"Hugh?" said Mrs. Miller doubtfully. "It doesn't give a Hugh here. It says the barony was created in 1619. What a long time ago!"

"What else does it say?" asked Miss Dutton.

"Not very much. Just who he married and his residence. Alleyne Court, Sussex, and Eaton Place. Well, I never!"

Mrs. Crosby peeped over her shoulder. "'Recreations, Hunting, Fishing,' Fancy!"

"Hardly likely that Miss Burton's friend belongs to the same family," remarked Miss Dutton.

This, naturally, had to be elucidated. At dinner that evening Mrs. Miller looked across the table at Laura, and said brightly: "By the way, Miss Burton, is your friend any relation of Lord Salinger of Alleyne Court? The name is so uncommon I couldn't help wondering."

Laura opened her mouth to repudiate the connection,

but shut it again as she remembered that Hugh had mentioned Alleyne once to her. Composedly she replied: "I believe so, Mrs. Miller."

"Ah, I thought he must be !" nodded Mrs. Miller, with a glance of triumph at Miss Dutton, who pretended to be listening to what Mr. Beeson was saying. "A cousin, I expect ?"

"His nephew." Laura's tone was not encouraging, but Mrs. Miller attempted one more remark.

"That is *most* interesting. I believe Alleyne is very old, isn't it ?"

"I don't know," said Laura, and there the conversation ended.

On the following day, a half-holiday, Hugh fetched her in a hired car and took her back with him to Villefranche. Sitting beside him, their hands clasped, Laura asked: "Hugh dear, they've been asking me at the hotel if you aren't a relation of Lord Salinger. Are you ? They said 'of Alleyne Court,' so I thought it must be right."

"Yes, he's my uncle," Hugh said, playing with her fingers. "Didn't I tell you ?"

"No. That is, you didn't tell me he was a lord."

"Darling," Hugh said gently, "not a lord ! He's a baron."

"Yes, that's what I meant," Laura said innocently. "Mrs. Miller found him in *Who's Who*. Miss Jackson told me. It seems to make it more impossible for us to be married."

"We won't start arguing about that again, madonna. Have you given notice at the shop yet ?"

She had not; he read the answer in her face, and frowned. "My dear, why haven't you done it ?"

"There's plenty of time," she said evasively.

"There is not. In a fortnight's time we shall be married."

"Longer than that, Hugh. In a fortnight, if you still wish it, I'll write home."

"Oh Laura, Laura! Still putting me off! I begin to think you don't care for me."

Her fingers clasped his wrist; she raised her eyes. "You know! oh, you know!"

There seemed to be no more to say; they sat in happy, silent communion, and it was only at nightfall, when they parted, that Hugh remembered to urge Laura to communicate with her parents at once. She reminded him of their compact; he continued to insist, so that at last she promised that the letter should be written on Sunday. She might reasonably expect to receive an answer during the following week; nothing would be wanting then except the consent of Hugh's mother. To this he made no reply; he had no intention of writing to Mrs. Salinger: he knew too well what her answer must be. With easy procrastination he determined to postpone the announcement of his marriage until it should be an accomplished fact. The controversy, the disapproval, the thunderings that must inevitably greet the news of his engagement would be so tedious and uncomfortable that he could not contemplate the effect this misalliance would produce without an inward recoil. He fancied that once the marriage had taken place the opposition would resolve itself into low rumblings only. These, coming as they would from a distance, he could support. By the time he took Laura to England the faint storm would have subsided; if he announced his intention of marrying her he felt sure that a deputation would arrive from England, bent upon rescuing him from his entanglement.

The reply to Laura's letter came even sooner than she expected. Her mother wrote three incoherent pages of joy and congratulation. She enclosed messages from the rest of the family; she seemed to think that no consent

could be considered necessary to such an amazingly fortunate alliance as this.

On the heels of this letter came one from Gladys, equally enthusiastic, but a little dissatisfied in tone. Laura had always had all the luck; it was only Laura who would pick up a catch like this Mr. Salinger. Yet let her have a care, for she, Gladys, knew very well what these posh men were. Was Laura sure that everything was O.K.? She must be careful not to be taken in. She supposed Laura would be too grand now to have anything to do with her family; certainly it was a great thing to marry the nephew of a baron; she could have no idea how jealous young May was.

No little curiosity was excited at Suzanne's, for on two occasions Hugh had called there for Laura in a car. Yvonne, who lived at Laura's *pension*, was closely questioned but would only shake her head mysteriously, unwilling to admit that she was not in Laura's confidence. She was only able to tell the assistants at the shop that Laura's fine friend came every evening to fetch her out, so that it was a rare thing if Laura was in to dinner at the *pension*.

Upon receiving this intelligence Geneviève said, with an unpleasant smile:

"When one thinks of her conversation and her so strict behaviour — *eh bien*, one never can tell!"

Solange, flushing, repudiated the insinuation on Laura's behalf. An argument sprang up concerning the probable intention of M. Salinger. The simple cynicism of these girls prevented the possibility of marriage from entering into the discussion. That was felt to be out of the question. The only point to be decided was whether Laura was as guileless as they had all supposed, or whether she concealed deep craft beneath her frank exterior. Even Geneviève admitted that this seemed hardly possible. Florrie Hope curled a sneering lip, and said

sharply: "Well, if she's as green as all that I only hope she won't let him spring it on her, that's all. I've met that sort of softness before."

This was a new and delectable aspect of the situation. Her comrades met Laura with a difference in their demeanours when she came amongst them next day. She guessed at once what had occasioned this change, and went silently about her work with only a glitter in her eyes and a hardening about her mouth to show that she understood. The atmosphere in the shop had become so unpleasant that she was glad that the time had arrived for her to give notice to Madame Duhamel. In the lunch hour she went to that lady's office, and told her that she wished to leave the shop as soon as it could be made convenient.

Madame was chagrined, and at first gave vent to her feelings. Laura listened to all that she said, and when the harangue came to an end raised her distressed eyes and said only: "I am very sorry, Madame."

Before this meekness Madame's flash of temper subsided. She began to arrange and re-arrange the papers on her desk, and presently said abruptly:

"It is a man, I know well."

Laura stood silent; the sharp eyes surveyed her piercingly. "This young Englishman I hear about, yes — ? This man with the very blue eyes that I see with you in the Jardin last night."

"Did you ?" Laura looked up in momentary surprise, "I didn't know."

"I see more than you think perhaps," said Madame drily. "It is because of him that you leave us, yes ?"

"Yes," Laura answered.

If Madame hoped to see some sign of guilt or discomposure she was disappointed. The bright brown eyes were soft and smiling.

"This is a strange confession you make ! I am told

this man is of high birth, is it not so? Such are not for girls in your position, Laura. And you — you are a good girl."

Laura thought by how little she had escaped being a bad girl, and her face became troubled. "I don't know, Madame."

"Me, I know. And if you were not I feel myself responsible for you. You will be offended perhaps that I speak thus to you?"

"No," Laura said. "You mean it kindly, I know, but it's not as you think, Madame. I'm going to be married."

"*Enfin!*" Again the papers were re-arranged upon the desk, into little heaps. "You are sure that it is not — what you call it? — a take-in?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

"And your parents? You have written to them, yes?"

"Yes, Madame. They're very pleased."

"There is no more to be said, then," Madame replied, shrugging. "When do you wish to leave?"

"Not till you've got someone in my place, Madame."

"Oh, *quant à ça*, there is not the necessity! The season is over. I should have given *congé* to Yvonne, but if you go Yvonne stays. If you will remain for this week?"

"Yes, of course," said Laura. "Thank you."

When the week ended Hugh came to slip a big emerald ring on to Laura's third finger, and to make the necessary arrangements at the Consulate. In ten days' time the ceremony might take place.

He spent the greater part of every day with her, but when she wished to go on a shopping expedition, and was evidently a little shocked at his offer to accompany her, he returned to Villefranche soon after tea with the intention of writing a few business letters. As he entered the lounge of the hotel a large figure arose from

an arm-chair and smiled genially. "Hullo, you rotter!"

Hugh stood quite still for a moment, dismay in his face. What ill wind had blown Quillinan here? He could not have timed his arrival more inopportunely. For a betraying moment annoyance was plain to see in Hugh, annoyance that his carefully laid plans should be overset by this visit, dismay that he should be thus discovered in the middle of an affair of which Maurice certainly would not approve. "Maurice!" he said, with forced enthusiasm, and came forward to shake hands.

Quillinan looked at him keenly; the smile lingered. "Funny chap," he remarked. "What's the matter?"

"My dear fellow, nothing!" Hugh protested. "I didn't expect you, that's all." He felt ill-used; peevishly he added: "You wrote that there was no prospect of your coming."

"Well, don't be so beastly pleased about it. There wasn't at the time." Quillinan sat down again. "Considering the letters I've had from you, begging and imploring me to come out — "

"And I'm awfully glad you have come," said Hugh hastily. "Have a drink?"

"Yes please, a long and cooling one. You look pretty fit."

"I am." Hugh rang the bell and ordered the drinks. "You're not exactly wasting away yourself, I may remark. How's everybody?" He was talking to gain time, as Quillinan knew. He wondered how he was to tell Maurice of his engagement, and what Maurice would say when he did tell him.

"All well," Quillinan replied. "Your mother sent her love; so did Joyce. I saw Roland the other day. Met him in Sackville Street. Nice chap, Roland. Very sound."

Hugh grimaced expressively. "Mother send any messages?"

"Dozens," Maurice grinned. "I've got a letter for

you from her." He produced it from an inner pocket, and handed it to Hugh. "How's your picture?"

"My — ? Oh, I haven't thought about that for ages!" said Hugh, slitting open the envelope.

Quillinan's eyebrows rose a little: Hugh evaded his look of enquiry, and began at once to read his letter. While he was thus occupied Quillinan filled and lit a pipe, and puffed contentedly, watching Hugh in some amusement from under his rather heavy eyelids.

He was some years Hugh's senior, and whereas Hugh looked younger than he really was, Quillinan looked considerably older. His massive frame seemed to belong rather to middle age; his hair had gone slightly grey at the temples, and round his deep-set eyes were many tiny lines, repeated on his brow. He had a large, jutting nose, and a whimsically irregular mouth; he dressed in baggy, aged garments. He looked rather sleepy, certainly kind, and sometimes shrewd.

As soon as Hugh had entered the room he had seen that something was wrong; knowing Hugh, he guessed the something to be a woman. He had never had any trouble in reading his friend, and he had noticed instantly the blank look on Hugh's face, and had been amused at Hugh's efforts to keep the conversation away from himself. He saw now, from the preoccupied expression in Hugh's eyes, that if he was reading the words of Mrs. Salinger's letter he was far from understanding the sense of them.

Hugh was thinking fast. Since Quillinan had come to Villefranche, presumably to stay, there could be no concealing his engagement from him. Quillinan must be told; more, he would have to be introduced to Laura. In his quiet, slow fashion he might attempt to dissuade his friend from entering upon the marriage. Little though his disapproval might affect the ultimate issue, Hugh thought resentfully that it would make him feel awkward, very young, at a disadvantage.

There were only five years between them, but the feeling of immeasurable superiority with which these years had invested Maurice in the days of boyhood still lingered in Hugh's consciousness. He might laugh at Maurice, but Maurice would always retain the power of making him feel supremely uncomfortable. Moreover, Maurice considered it his prerogative to lecture him, and to criticize. He had been so long a friend, the two families were so closely connected, that no doubt he thought he had the right.

Hugh turned the last page of his mother's letter and very slowly read it, debating whether it was possible at least to postpone the confession (he felt it to be that) of his approaching marriage. In wretched indecision he folded the letter, and returned it to its envelope. "How has your book got on ?" he asked absently.

"Gone up to the publisher," said Quillinan. He relit his pipe, and spoke between puffs. "Queer thing — ran across Gerry Oldmay last week. 'Member ?"

Hugh caught at the digression: they talked of Oldmay, and the War, to which he belonged, and old times. And at length Maurice said: "What have you done with your picture ? I'd like to see it."

"It's only a sketch — a daub." Hugh tried to brush the subject aside, thinking that the picture must surely betray his secret.

"What happened to the model ?" asked Quillinan.

Hugh looked up sharply, but Quillinan was splashing soda into his whiskey, and noticed nothing. "She went back to Nice."

"Oh ?" Quillinan asked no further question, but began to talk of his journey, and other trivialities.

Hugh, with his mind full of Laura, found this indifference provokingly alien to his mood. The discussion of such commonplace matters as the unsteadiness of the Exchange, and the over-heating of the French trains caused him no longer to wish to keep his engagement a

secret, but to tell Maurice of it, that Maurice might know with what greater, more important affairs his friend's brain was occupied. It was insupportable that Maurice should go on talking in this calm, everyday manner when he himself had reached (so he thought) so enormous a crisis in his life. He jumped up and walked to the window with his hands in his pocket. "Maurice !"

"Hullo ?"

"Look here — " His voice trembled slightly. "That girl — you called her my model — "

"Well ?"

The muscles of Hugh's mouth twitched; he spoke over his shoulder, defiantly. "I'm going to marry her."

There came no answer; Hugh turned, and saw that Quillinan, with his glass half-way to his mouth, was regarding him quizzically, a twinkle in his eye. He stared indignantly. "It's true !"

"Good lord, I thought you were pulling my leg !" said Quillinan. "Didn't you say she was a girl out of a shop ?"

"I have ceased to think that that matters."

"You silly ass !" Quillinan remarked frankly. "I take it she's not a lady ?"

"By birth, no. I don't think snobbery is one of my vices, Maurice."

"Don't you ?" said Quillinan, rather drily.

"As far as instincts go, Laura is — is a — "

"Perfect lady ?"

Hugh coloured angrily. "Damn you, Maurice, you haven't even seen her ! She's a goddess, a queen ! If you expect a little giggling, peroxided miss you will be surprised."

"The fact remains, my dear chap, that it's not the way of your family to marry into the tradesman class."

Hugh laughed. "When have I been a slave to the creed of my family ? — to any creed ?"

"I should say, all your life," drawled Maurice, "At heart."

"How little you know me!" Hugh's eyes flashed. "For a student of human nature your powers of perception aren't extraordinary!"

Quillinan smiled, but said nothing. After a moment Hugh burst forth again. "That hide-bound attitude infuriates me! Because Laura can't show a line of ancestors all more or less disreputable she is not to be thought a fit bride for me. Good God! does the accident of her birth make her nature less sweet?"

Quillinan knocked out his pipe with slow deliberation. "It is the expression of her nature that is likely to be affected."

Hugh spoke more calmly. "Very little, Maurice; very occasionally. She will surprise you. There is commonness — oh no, let me be honest! — there is gentility. That can be cured."

"Not so easily as vulgarity."

"Oh, nonsense, Maurice! The taint is so slight." He paused, and, turning, smiled, so that all his belligerence disappeared, and his natural charm reasserted itself. "No good arguing, old man. You can't move me. She's the embodiment of the ideal. You have only to look at her — She is without alloy." He began to pace up and down. "Since I have known her I look back with disgust at the other women that have had their place in my life! At myself! She puts me out of conceit — she thinks me — my God, what does she not think me? I tell you, Maurice, not you nor anyone can turn me now. It's not lightly engaged upon. I have thought deeply — I believe I have struggled. I have gone away. The hunger grows. There has been that between us — I cannot speak of it; I am at her feet. The nobility, the selflessness — I had not imagined it to be in any woman! Big, beautiful, simple creature!" His restless eyes challenged. "Well! What have you to say?"

"I reserve judgment until I have seen," answered Quillinan. "I have heard a great deal of this before, Hugh."

"I swear to you I am sincere !"

Quillinan nodded. "You are under a spell of enchantment. Can that last ? When that is done, what will remain ? Not companionship, not happiness. With a woman of your own order there's comfort ahead, and understanding, and education, which counts for much, and the same stand-point for outlook on life. You don't believe me ?"

"Oh — ! For any other man, perhaps. I want more than that staid comfort. We speak from different planes, Maurice; you don't understand what I feel. Love takes no account of the worldly obstacles."

"You see them, then ?"

"Am I blind ? Of course I see them. There are rocks, and beyond the rocks pitfalls."

"And you think to come safely over all ?"

"Because we love !"

There was again silence.

"Maurice, do you begin to understand ?"

"I believe if you love you may surmount any obstacle."

"Well !"

"It must be perfect love. The obstacles — the word's inept — the flea-bites, would find out any flaw in it. Your passion might be strengthened by great adversity, from the dramatic sense which you have so strongly. I imagine the tiny jars would wear it down far sooner."

"I am confident I love Laura well enough to snap my fingers at those jars. I shall not take her home until I have — oh, I hate to discuss her like this !"

"And she," said Quillinan, disregarding, "is her love strong enough to flourish under adversity ?"

"It's not for me to say. There is depth to her."

"Your people don't know ?"

Hugh put his hands in his pockets, and began to jingle keys. "You know what the mater is !"

Quillinan made no reply; there was an uncompromising set to his mouth. Hugh went on fidgetting. "She wouldn't understand. How should she, when she has never seen Laura ? There would only be a fuss. I abhor rows. My uncle too — impossible to interest his sympathy. He doesn't know the meaning of love. His outlook's sordid. He — "

"It has been your outlook, Hugh."

"I am changed; Laura has changed me. He can't fail to admire her."

"His admiration would not be likely to affect his sense of what is fitting."

"Damn it, I don't see what it has to do with him ! I am not his son; I am not even his heir."

Maurice hesitated. "There is surely something owing to him — to your mother."

"I know, I know, but I must consider Laura first. If the mater was to come out here ! You needn't think I like this way of doing it, but — oh, you know ! Wait till you see Laura before you say more."

Maurice smiled. "I expect a Venus."

"You will find an angel," Hugh said.

CHAPTER V

ON THE following morning Hugh went in a car to Nice, to bring Laura back with him to lunch. He found her alone in the salon, writing a letter home. She looked up as he entered, and stretched out her hand. "Hughie dear!"

Hugh went to her, kissed the soft pink palm of her hand, and then her ready lips. "Sweetheart!"

She stroked his face; he sat down on the arm of her chair, and drew her back against his shoulder. "My beautiful, a most sickening thing has happened. I say sickening: I don't really mean that. A troublesome thing, an annoyance." He touched her thick lustrous hair. "I am consumed with impatience."

"Why, what is it?" she asked, tilting back her head to look up into his face.

"You've heard me speak of Maurice Quillinan? He took me by surprise — unwelcome surprise, you may guess — yesterday. He is at Villefranche now."

She felt with him; she made a little grimace of petulance. "Oh Hughie!"

"I know. He's my friend, and I could willingly have pushed him into the sea. But you'll like him, my dearest. He wants to see you, of course."

"Does — does he know?"

"I told him at once."

"What did he say, Hughie?"

Hugh's arm tightened about her. "That he was anxious to see you. You mustn't be shy of him, madonna."

"I'll try not to be. I can't help feeling — feeling out

of place. You and he belong — I can't explain. He must think I'm an adventuress."

Hugh could not help laughing. "Darling, he couldn't possibly think so ! You don't look in the least like one. Don't think these things. Maurice is so harmless, so unalarming. I want you to like him."

"I'm sure to, aren't I ? I mean, he's your friend. I couldn't do other. Am I — are you going to take me to Villefranche ?"

"At once. Don't tell me you must go shopping ! My patience won't stand another day of banishment."

Her eyes sparkled. "Oh Hughie, one afternoon !"

"And evening. Did you have success ?"

She nodded. "Such pretty things !"

"I'm agog to see them." He laughed down at her.

"No, no ! At least, some. A hat. I want you to like it. It's one of Suzanne's. Madame let me have it cheap."

"Go and put it on !" he ordered. "Oh Laura, wear white today !"

She got up. "It's a white hat. How lucky ! And a white frock. That too ?"

"The one we saw in the Place Masséna ?"

"The one you told me to get," she smiled.

"What a charming obedience !"

"Oh, if it hadn't happened to suit me — !"

"No, no, don't spoil it ! I choose to think you so tractable."

"I would do anything to please you," she said seriously.

When she came down some twenty minutes later she more than fulfilled Hugh's expectations. The frock was of loose, dull silk, severely cut, with admirable lines. Her black hair curled from under the brim of a large white hat (her taste could not err there); her eyes were bright with happiness. She wore no ornament save

her engagement ring, and she carried a sunshade, and long gloves.

Hugh sprang up. "Ah, you angel! I'm struck dumb."

"You're teaching me to be extravagant, Hughie. I got quite a shock when they told me the price. Profiteering, I call it. But what will I do?"

"It's perfect. You'll snare Quillinan; that's inevitable. Ready?"

"Quite ready." She went to the door, and out.

Throughout the drive her gaiety flourished, but when they approached Villefranche she grew quiet, and held Hugh's hand rather tightly.

Quillinan was sitting outside the hotel, reading a newspaper. As the car drew up he rose and looked keenly at the shy, lovely face that was turned towards him.

Hugh jumped out, and gave his hand to Laura. Quillinan was amazed at her height and her magnificent proportions; he was hardly prepared for such startling beauty.

"Laura, this is Quillinan," said Hugh. He threw Maurice a glance of triumph, of disdain.

Maurice took Laura's hand, hesitatingly advanced. "How do you do?" he said pleasantly. "I have been so looking forward to this meeting."

Her hand trembled slightly; she knew no ready phrases; she stammered a few words. "Yes, I'm — sure — Very pleased — It's quite a surprise."

Hugh's eyes craved Quillinan's indulgence. Quillinan's whole attention was concentrated on Laura. Her incoherence was provoked by shyness, he knew; he had nothing but sympathy for her embarrassment; he was relieved to hear her voice so deep and musical.

"If I'd known I need hardly say I shouldn't have dared inflict myself upon you both," he said, smiling. "It's the most stupendous cheek."

"Oh no! How can you think — ? I'm so glad to

meet Hugh's friends. It must have been a great surprise to you. It's very nice of you — " She felt herself out of her depth, and looked to Hugh for support. He pulled forward a chair.

"Sit down, darling. You'd like some lemonade ? It's no use offering you a cocktail."

"No, thank you. I should like some lemonade, please. It's so hot, isn't it ?" She turned to Maurice.

"Delightfully," he said, seating himself beside her. "I've come straight from London, and there we've been sighing under the scourge of bitter winds. You don't like the heat ?"

"Oh yes ! That is, I don't mind. I've always been used to England. Gladys — she's my sister — writes that it's frightfully cold there now. She quite envies me." Her eyes followed Hugh, with a shade of dismay in them. He was walking towards the door into the hotel. She felt stranded; knew not what to say; sat playing with the tassel of her sunshade.

"How do you like the Riviera ?" asked Maurice, judging that it would be more agreeable to her if the conversation were conducted on strictly conventional lines.

"Very much, thank you. I think it's lovely. So different to England, and — and that sort of thing. I'm staying at Nice, you know."

"So Hugh told me. I suppose it's still very crowded ?"

"Oh, very ! At least, I believe people are beginning to go. The season seems to last such a short time."

"People are so foolish," he agreed. "In another month the place will be looking at its best. They let the flowers bloom then, you know."

"Oh, do they ? I expect they don't need to cut them and send them abroad in the summer. It must be very pretty."

"A riot of colour. Well, Hugh, have you ordered lunch ?"

"I have," Hugh looked inquiringly at Laura. She smiled; she was more at ease. They went in presently, to lunch, and the meal passed off very well, although Hugh could not help feeling acutely conscious of the finicking gentility of Laura's table manners. They became magnified in his brain; he imagined that Maurice must be condemning her.

Laura soon managed to overcome her outward nervousness. Quillinan was all that was kind; she liked his smile; he was at pains to draw her out of herself. After lunch they sat outside again, in the shade. The afternoon was sleepily hot, conversation languid and unforced. Quillinan and Laura each had ample opportunity for studying the other. When the moment of parting came, Laura was quite natural again. She gave Quillinan her firm handshake, her smile was diffident but friendly. She hoped he intended to stay at Villefranche.

"Well ?" Hugh asked, as soon as they were inside the car. "Tell me what you thought !"

"Oh, I like him very much ! So kind — I'm sure he couldn't have been nicer. Did I — did I do right, Hughie ?"

He could not criticize her conduct; there had been mistakes; it would be cruel to speak of them, when her eyes were so anxiously raised to his. "You are always adorable," he told her.

"Oh — ! As long as I didn't disappoint you — ! Will Mr. Quillinan be here for our wedding ?"

"You wish it ?"

"I thought you would like it."

"It's not at all a bad scheme. I'll ask him."

Quillinan, when the plan was suggested, hesitated a moment, and then said: "If I am not in the way, I should like to stay for a week or two. Sure ?"

"Laura wishes it," Hugh said, with a bright look.

"That's very kind of her."

Hugh waited a moment. "Well, Maurice, well ?"

Quillinan looked out to sea. "Her beauty is even greater than I had expected."

"I told you it would be so. What else ?"

"It's impossible to judge her upon a single afternoon's acquaintance."

"You've formed an opinion; its inevitable."

"My opinion may offend you."

"Let me hear it."

The grey eyes travelled slowly to his face. "I think she is far too good for you."

An eager flush mounted to Hugh's cheeks. "How could that offend me ? I know it so well."

"Your estimation of her character was just." Quillinan went on. "Her soul is in her eyes. But she won't make you happy. I don't think you have it in you to make her happy."

"I'm entirely at a loss. What do you mean ?"

"If I said there is a depth to her nature which is lacking in your own you would only be indignant."

"You've said it. It's possible you don't know me so well as you think."

"Of course."

"Apart from that — which concerns Laura and me alone — you've no other reasons against my marriage ?"

"Many."

"You exasperate me ! Isn't she queenly ? Could you call her vulgar ?"

"No. And yet her class is stamped upon her." He paused. "I think, indelibly."

"I must disagree. Don't say I'm infatuated !"

Quillinan paid no heed to the interruption. "I may be wrong; I don't pretend to be infallible. But it seems to me that never were two people so badly matched. There's an immense gulf between you."

"Of class ?"

"Of everything. Class, certainly. You can't have considered, Hugh. You're in love: I hardly dare speak my mind."

"Please do! It's as well I should know your opinion; it will be the world's."

Quillinan ignored the sneer. "I think, then, that it's madness for you to contemplate marriage with this woman. I don't say girl; she's mature; her nature's settled; there would be more hope if she were younger."

"She's thirty."

"Exactly. You will have to combat ignorance. In itself that is enough to make you pause. She won't understand one tenth of the things that make up your world. Her education is naturally poor. How will you converse together when your love has grown more temperate? There is her outlook. I know the type. You can have no notion of the beliefs that govern her class. None of them are yours. The niceties of social conduct as she understands them will constantly set your teeth on edge. You won't be able to rid her of those manners. You might teach her to be polite were she vulgar; that's a comparatively easy matter. But how will you convince her that the careful manners of her class, which she has been brought up to study, which she thinks true politeness, are wrong? She will be shocked by the more casual manners of our class; she has been taught gentility; to shake that off must go terribly against the grain. And, as I say, she's not a girl. I doubt if it can be done. You would improve her, no doubt. You might teach her our ways, but have you thought how you will hurt her?"

Hugh's voice shook. "Maurice — you — stab me. May she not — emulate — without my teaching?"

Quillinan looked at him quickly. There was a sincerity of feeling in his face. "My dear chap, I don't know. I'm hitting hard, I suppose. It is only what I think. I don't want to destroy your happiness."

"It's what you're trying to do," said Hugh. "And hers."

From what he had seen of Laura, Quillinan could believe that more easily. "Perhaps. Yet I feel that nothing but misery for you both can come through this marriage."

"I hope I shall prove you wrong."

"If you are bent upon it I must hope so too." He spoke more slowly, very deliberately. "You asked my opinion. There is something more I have to say which won't please you. Laura Burton is by no means the first woman in your life."

"She's the first I've wanted to marry !"

"There's another aspect I could put before you," Maurice said. "You enter upon this marriage most unpropitiously. What is the point of this hole-in-corner procedure ? It seems to me grossly unfair to your relations. You're of age; nothing can stop your pleasing yourself so why do you rush into marriage as though you were afraid that someone — your mother, your uncle — would wrest you from Laura ? Why must you be married here, at once ? Wouldn't it be more prudent to extend the engagement ?"

Hugh frowned. "It must be like this. No, I don't like it, but I know my people. What is done will be accepted with a good grace. If I were to announce merely an engagement I know very well that my mother — even my uncle — would not scruple to lacerate Laura's feelings in a way of which I won't think. I can easily believe that my mother would so work upon her that she'd refuse to marry me. God knows I've had trouble enough to induce her to marry me as it is. I won't expose her to my mother's tender mercies without the protection of our marriage."

"I see," said Quillinan. "I must still feel that as far as your people are concerned you are playing a low-down game."

"I agree," said Hugh. "But I know what I'm about."

There was no more to be said on the subject. Unconvinced as he was, Quillinan saw too keenly the inutility of further argument to attempt any. The rest of the day passed in amicable conversation. Hugh evidently considered that the last word had been said; characteristically he put the matter behind him. Quillinan could not think that, but at the moment he did not see what next was to be done. Interference in the love affairs of others he knew to be not only dangerous, but too blameable to be lightly engaged upon. His somewhat reticent nature shrank from such interference, yet he had too great a regard for the Salingers to allow this step to be taken without putting in a word of advice. The expedient of writing to Lord Salinger he at once dismissed; it was too mean, too tale-bearing to be considered. His position did not warrant the taking of so drastic a step; had he been related to Hugh he might have overcome his natural repugnance to such a course, but he could not think that he had interest enough, or authority, to do so. No doubt he would be blamed by Lord Salinger and Emmeline for having allowed the wedding to take place without advising them of its happening. That could not be helped; he hoped to induce Hugh at least to write home before the actual ceremony.

A week later he was still in perplexity over the right course to be followed. He had seen Laura several times, and although he had had no private conversation with her he was able to gauge her character fairly accurately. He recognized its sterling qualities; he believed she loved Hugh deeply. To what extent, however, he did not know until their fourth meeting, when they were left alone together.

She came to Villefranche; in the middle of her visit a business letter demanding instant attention arrived for Hugh. He withdrew to answer it, commanding Maurice to entertain Laura in his absence. He had no

sooner entered the house than Laura turned to Quillinan, with, he thought, relief in her face. "May we go for a little walk?" she asked. "I have something I want to say."

"Certainly," he answered, getting up at once. "Shall we let Hugh know? He might like to catch us up."

"Please, I would rather not. I — I don't want him — for a while. What I'm going to say to you is very private."

He thought he had studied her successfully, but he had no inkling now of what she meant to say to him. They set off together inland, and for some time walked in silence. Laura was looking straight ahead; the frowning, anxious look on her face surprised him.

"Mr. Quillinan," she said at last. "You've known Hugh a long time, haven't you?"

It struck him that she was choosing her words carefully. He assented.

"You — you probably know him very well."

"I believe so, Miss Burton."

She paused in her walk, and looked straightly up at him. "Am I doing wrong to marry him? I want you to tell me the truth."

He was astonished; he did not know what to say. She waited for a moment, and then walked on again. "I see."

Involuntarily he said: "You misunderstand my silence; I was taken aback. It was an unusual question."

"You must think me strange — I ought not to be talking to you like this, but you're his friend — you'll know what's best for him. You can judge — I don't want anything but his happiness."

The means of stopping the marriage was presented. Quillinan said only: "Will you not tell me what is in your mind?"

"I am trying — it's so difficult to explain. In my heart I feel that I'm not doing right. I'm not good

enough for him; I'm not his sort. You see, Mr. Quillinan, I'm only a shop girl. I haven't had a proper education. Perhaps — his mother will say I'm — I'm common. I've always said I didn't hold with marriages out of one's own class. Then — then I met — him, and — I can't tell you all that. I felt *then* it was wrong. He went away — a month. When he came back he persuaded me: it seemed right then. Only, I have thought, perhaps it wasn't right; perhaps I made myself believe it was because I wanted it so much. Do you see ?"

He bowed his head. She drew a deep breath. "You are very kind to — help me like this. It's so hard — There was the happiness, you see. It was so — so *big*, it didn't seem as though it could be right. I don't know if you can understand that ? But he was happy too. I thought I might be able to make him happy always. I *think* I made myself believe that too. Because when I said No to him he was so terribly upset — Sometimes I think I ought to have stuck to it, but I couldn't hurt him ! You don't know — " Her voice trembled; she brushed her hand across her eyes. "I can't explain that: what I felt. It's inside me; I don't know how to put it into words like you would. That's education again. If I'd said No, kept to it, he must have gone away and — and after a time forgotten. At least, not — not minded so dreadfully. I don't know. Only I was weak; I gave in to him. I thought it was to make him happy." She kneaded her hands together in agitation. "Now I think it — it was my selfishness. It was — it was *my* happiness. I felt I couldn't bear to lose him. And I thought if I tried very hard I'd be able to — to make myself to be like him. Do you understand ? I thought I could learn — learn to be a real lady. I daresay it sounds very silly. I expect I wouldn't ever really take anyone in. But I couldn't help *hoping*. I don't suppose however hard I try I can ever be a companion to

him. Just now he — he doesn't notice the things I do wrong, and — and the things I don't know. I can't talk about books and pictures, and that. I haven't ever been taught, like the women of his own class. And — and people will know at once that I'm not a real lady, and p'raps they'll be sorry for Hugh; p'raps they won't have anything to do with me. That would make him so wretched, wouldn't it, Mr. Quillinan ? He'd want to be — proud of me, and — and he couldn't be. Then again, I don't know the ways of his people. I've only lived in a small house, and — had a girl to do the rough work. I shan't know how to go on in a grand house. I shan't be able to talk properly to his friends. After — after a little, perhaps, he'll — he'll get tired of me — bored. P'raps he'll wish he'd married someone who could be really interested in his sort of things. I've thought, and thought. Just — loving — isn't enough. And when you came I didn't think I could do better than ask you — what *you* think." She stopped, and caught her breath on a little, dry sob.

Quillinan was deeply moved. Such a confession, such a revelation as this, he had not expected. He had listened in all sympathy; he was silent now for a few minutes. At length he answered. "Miss Burton, I believe you care for Hugh — more than anyone can perhaps realize."

"Yes," she said. "The only thing that can hurt me is his unhappiness. If I were to bring that to him I could not bear it."

"And if I advise you to give him up, if I say that is for his ultimate happiness, you would do so ?"

"How could I do else ?" she said simply. "Oh, what am I to do, Mr. Quillinan ? You understand people's minds, you write great books about them — you must know what is right for me to do !"

"No, no," he said. "That's not so. It's true I've studied the subject, but only to find how little I know

after all. Now I am going to make a confession to you: I have tried to dissuade Hugh from marrying you."

"Ah !" she cried out.

"Wait ! I say I have tried. My efforts were quite unavailing. I know Hugh, Miss Burton. There is nothing he dislikes, evades, more than opposition and argument. Usually he will give in to so strenuous a fight as I put up. You see, I am being perfectly frank with you. He told me, I am sure sincerely, that nothing I could say would move him. He spoke of you in such terms that I was certain now at least he loves you as dearly as you could desire. The only doubt in my mind was whether it would last. You have spoken of the difference of class between you. That, of course, was in my mind. But Hugh said: 'Love takes no account of the worldly obstacles.' It is very true, Miss Burton. I will have no hand in separating two people who love as I believe you do. I can only apologize for my interference. If Hugh loves as you love, all will be well with you." He stopped, and took her hand. "Marry him. I believe — I hope — you can give him what he wants. There will be difficulties, jars. I have no fear for your courage. You have spoken of the attitude towards you of Hugh's friends: you have met one; he has nothing but respect and admiration for you. Hugh loves you; I don't pretend to know how deeply, how lastingly. It's not a matter of class or education; it's above all that. You best know your own feelings; you best know his. Does he love as you love ?"

"Oh, how do I know ? Surely — He has told me. It is so very private."

"Miss Burton, I am going to say something you will perhaps think unkind. Hugh is — what shall I call it ? — emotional. Unconsciously he speaks more passionately than he feels. I don't think his love is like yours; it would be strange if it were. It's more selfish — "

"You must not. Oh, please — !"

"I am trying only to warn you. He won't give as you give; I don't think it's in his nature. He will take. You must bear that, and his moods, which are many — Has he the power to make *you* happy ?"

She looked up, smiling. "Is that all ? Oh yes, yes ! If he will love me only a little ! It's not of that that I think."

"I know it's not, but you should think of it. It's your own happiness at stake."

"I am happy when I am with him," she answered softly.

"Then I say again, marry him. I think perhaps you may make something of him."

She touched his arm. "Are you *sure ?* Oh, don't say it just to please me ! I *want* to do what's right."

"I am sure," he said steadily.

They turned, and walked silently back to the hotel. As they went Quillinan was thinking rather hard. Whether he had acted for the best or not time alone would show. The responsibility of separating these two lovers was too enormous for him to bear. There was the possibility of the marriage proving to be a success. This vital, noble creature had it in her to influence Hugh, he thought. There was firmness in her character, and great courage. While she had Hugh at her side she would not heed the rebuffs she must receive. Her mind was so curiously humble, she was so ready to be taught, that she might lose her little, common mannerisms. She was worthy a better husband; she had spilled her heart for a man who was not good enough to black her shoes, and she set him on a pinnacle, and worshipped him, and would not bear a syllable in his dispraise. This veneration might make Hugh, it might spoil him. If he loved her as he said he did Maurice could feel no uneasiness for them.

Hugh, jealously, wanted to know what had been said

during this mysterious walk. Maurice removed his pipe from his mouth, and replied: "I can't tell you. Miss Burton was kind enough to confide in me."

"You didn't — " Hugh broke off, staring fiercely. "You didn't dare — ?"

"I advised her to marry you." Quillinan's eyes rested sternly on him. "She is a splendid woman. You will never deserve her." Then he put his hands on Hugh's shoulders, and his fingers gripped. "Don't let her down. There is nothing — I believe literally nothing — she wouldn't do for you. If you don't love as she does it would be kinder to let her go."

"My dear chap!" stammered Hugh. "I'm — I'm madly in love with her!"

"Yes, that's what I'm afraid of," said Maurice curtly. "*Carpe diem quam minime credula postero.*"

CHAPTER VI

LAURA and Hugh were married at the Consulate on one April morning. To Laura the ceremony seemed unreal. She had dreamed, years ago, of a wedding in a dim grey church, with white satin, and flowers. In this business-like union the appearance of romance was lacking; in her heart it bloomed like a June rose, and although the chill ceremony might shock, it could not kill it. And when Hugh slipped the gold ring on to her finger, and she looked into his eyes, she saw her romance there, and the walls of this plain room crumbled and fell, and she stood with Hugh upon a pinnacle of love.

The wedding-breakfast was held at a large hotel on the promenade, a strange festivity between three people only, but none the less gay for its strangeness. These lovers came down a little nearer to earth, dragged by Quillinan's everyday presence. There was laughter and inconsequent talk, the sparkle of champagne in shallow glasses, gay toasts, and short silences wherein happiness brooded.

Quillinan put them into their train. Hugh gave his hand a quick, eloquent pressure; Laura's eyes thanked him for her bliss. He thought them great pools of light; the memory of them stayed with him a long time.

The train moved slowly out of the station; Quillinan turned away with a sigh. It was done, for better or worse. The bride and the groom were gone, but the best man remained, curiously moved, curiously depressed, unable to think of anything but the fate of these two whom he had helped to join.

They had no thought for him, either then or for many days. They came to Florence in the cool starlit evening, and drove through the narrow streets to their hotel. In the stillness of their own apartments they kissed, and it seemed as though they were alone in all the world.

Hugh drew Laura out on to the balcony, and saw her bathed in moonlight. There were no words spoken; they stood in the silence of full hearts for a long time, until Laura, leaning back her head against Hugh's shoulder, said almost dreamily: "If I lost you tomorrow, there would always be today that I'd remember and be thankful for."

The days slipped by unnoticed; no thought of the outer world or of the future came to disturb the dream of their present life. Then letters arrived from England, and brought with them a passing coldness.

Laura held up the one addressed to herself, and said: "Oh Hughie, is it — ?"

He glanced at it. "Yes, it's from the mater." He hesitated; he had not read his own. "Don't open it yet !"

"Not ? But — "

"Let's have breakfast first."

She laid the letter down reluctantly, and came to the table. Coffee and rolls were brought to their room each morning; she preferred a more substantial meal, but Hugh liked it this way. "I think I'll finish dressing. I don't somehow like breakfast in a kimono. It doesn't seem the thing."

"Why not ? You look adorable."

"I should think I ought to in this dressing-gown," she said naïvely. He had bought it, a dull red silk wrapper with sprawling embroidery.

"Besides, it's so lazy and altogether slack," said Hugh. "And I love being lazy. Do sit down !"

She sat down, and began to pour out the coffee. Hugh picked up his mother's letter and opened it.

"Oh, and you told me I wasn't to!" Laura cried.

Hugh ran his eye down the page. "You can now," he said graciously.

So Laura read her letter, and then put it down rather carefully.

"What does she say?" Hugh asked.

"She's very kind — please read it!"

"She's an awfully bad letter writer," Hugh said, and picked up the single sheet of paper. The letter was conventional, and very cold. Mrs. Salinger hoped that she would soon make the acquaintance of her son's wife.

"Oh, that's all right!" said Hugh, relieved. "She's taken it jolly well. Now I must see what Uncle Charles says."

Laura made no remark. Hugh might read warmth into his mother's letter because he wished to do so; for her this letter came as a blast of chill east wind upon a summer's day. She met Hugh's smiling eyes gravely, unable to take his optimistic view of his mother's attitude. To a woman this woman's antagonism was plain to see. The future was dark, with pitfalls on the way, but she turned her thoughts from it, because she could not undo what she had done, because Hugh wanted her to be happy.

Hugh's own letter from Mrs. Salinger could not be regarded as satisfactory; he thought he would leave it unanswered for a while. Lord Salinger's letter was even more disturbing, for it was evident that the writer had guessed the secret of Laura's class. Hugh did not quite know what to make of it, and certainly he did not like its satirical flavour. There were no veiled threats; there was no talk of the changing of Wills. Hugh reflected that such an ordinary procedure would not be likely to

recommend itself to his uncle. He need not have been afraid of that, however remotely. But it was uncanny of Salinger to guess the truth about Laura's birth so quickly.

He picked up the third letter, which was from his sister. It exasperated him, but it was not, in its way, unamusing. Joyce evidently expected a maid-servant; it would be his pleasure to astonish Joyce. He made up his mind that it would be prudent to leave all three letters unanswered for quite some little time. Meanwhile there could be no object in allowing their contents to worry him. He put them away in his pocket book, relegated them to the dim future, and turned to Laura, his glorious present. "I'm getting rather fed-up with Florence," he said suddenly. "I've always loved the dead splendour of the Medici, but I'm damned if I like the tourists. I think we'll go to Siena."

Laura entered into the spirit of this at once. "Where is it ?" she asked with interest.

"Oh, south-ish !" he answered vaguely. "And after Siena we might go to Assisi. Or right away south to Amalfi. Or — or anywhere. How soon could we leave this place ?"

"I don't think we could go till tomorrow," said Laura. "Because I haven't started to pack. Oughtn't we to give a week's notice ?"

"Good Lord, no !"

"I thought you paid by the week ?"

"So I do, but that doesn't bind us down to the place, darling."

"It means having to pay up till next Wednesday, and it does seem awful waste of money," she said doubtfully. "Perhaps the manager would make a reduction, if you asked him."

"Not he. And in any case I've no intention of asking him."

Laura sat up. "I tell you what, Hughie," she said.

"These foreign hotel keepers are profiteers, that's what they are. I call it rank wickedness. I never saw anything like our bill for this week."

"I didn't know you saw it at all," Hugh interrupted. "You weren't meant to."

"You left it lying on the dressing-table. Oughtn't I to have read it? It wasn't in an envelope or anything."

"My darling, of course you can read anything you like of mine. But don't start worrying your beautiful head about bills. That's my affair. And you mustn't forget that the Exchange is in our favour."

"I don't know anything about Exchanges," said Laura firmly. "I don't think I want to. One day it's one thing, the next it's another. There's no keeping up with it. But if that fat manager isn't swindling you, all I can say is, it looks like it. Seems to me you pay extra for breathing. I'd like to give him a piece of my mind." She buttered a roll vigorously. "Even this petty dejeunay's like eating money. It's a scandal." She looked up, and saw Hugh's eyes alight with laughter. "Yes, it's all very well for you to laugh," she said, with quivering lips. "One of these days you'll wake up and find yourself ruined. You'll laugh on the other side of your face then."

"I didn't know I'd married a shrew," he murmured.

"Live and learn," said Laura calmly. "No, really Hughie, you did ought to be more careful." She picked up the coffee pot as she spoke and of impulse Hugh stretched out his hand across the table and gently pressed down her crooked little finger. She raised her eyes in surprise.

"Dearest, may I say something?"

"Yes, what is it?" She saw by his face, curiously apologetic, that in something, she knew not what, she had erred. All at once she dreaded that he should tell her, and was shy. Her glance fell but she overcame this

shrinking and forced herself to look up again. "Have I done wrong ?"

Hugh found this harder than he had imagined it would be. The clear frank gaze discomforted him; he knew that what he meant to say must wound her, and thus wound him also. Yet he felt that it must be said. "It's only your little finger, sweetheart. Keep it tucked down with the others. And — you won't be offended ? — don't say 'did ought': just 'ought.' "

The warm colour was in her cheeks; her hand trembled under his. For a moment it was as though he had struck her, and a gulf yawned between them. Swiftly she bridged it, and hid her own chagrin that she might make Hugh less ill at ease. "I see, Hughie. Show me — show me how to hold the coffee pot."

"Just like this," he said uncomfortably, and took it from her.

"You ought to have told me before, dear," she said.

He was as red as she. Her humble acquiescence made him feel a brute. Had she been offended, had she argued, his task would have been easy. As it was, he went quickly round the table and took her in his arms. "Darling, darling ! Hold it as *you* like !" he said huskily.

Her hand caressed his sleek head. There was a tremor in her voice but she spoke lightly because she could not bear that this incident should pain him. "Why, Hughie, you know I want to do everything as you wish ! Just as though I fancied myself too much to be told-off ! Tell me some more things I didn't — I mean, I oughtn't to do."

"There's nothing !" he said vehemently. "Nothing ! You're perfect, an angel !"

"Queer sort of angel," she answered, laughing. The atmosphere of constraint still lingered; she wondered, desperately, how she could banish it. Silence must indicate that she had indeed taken offence; a change of

subject would be, she felt, a snub. That would mean that never again would Hugh speak of this, or venture to correct her. Suddenly she felt that her attitude now must decide the course of their lives. It would be easier to put the matter aside, easier for them both, but it would mean that there would be one thing between them of which they dared not speak. She thought there must never be forbidden ground in their intimacy. She plunged gallantly into speech. "It's a good job you told me, Hughie, because I'd never have seen it for myself. Fancy me thinking I was doing quite the right thing while all the time it was wrong! It shows you I need to be told, doesn't it?" She felt him wince, knew that she had only made him more uncomfortable. She tried again to make light of the affair, and of her own self-consciousness. "Now don't you hesitate to tell me when I go wrong will you, Hugh? Because it's just you and me, my dear, and I couldn't mind anything you said. Not when I know you love me. What I should mind would be to know I was behaving — behaving commonly — in front of your people."

He pressed his lips against her hair. "Don't, Laura, don't! You make me feel a worm!"

"You've no call to feel that, dear." She saw that discussion only made constraint grow stronger. She kissed Hugh, gave his shoulder a little comforting pat. "When are we going to — what was the name of the place?"

"Siena," he replied. The tension passed. He sat down on the edge of the table. "Can we really get off by tomorrow?"

"Lord yes, I should hope so!" Her eyes fell on his shirt. "Hughie, you've got a button off! If it isn't just like you to say nothing about it!"

"Oh, I meant to tell you, only I forgot!" he smiled. "I've lost the button altogether."

She rose, and went in search of her work-basket.

"No, look here, we haven't got time for it now !" expostulated Hugh. "It doesn't show."

Laura returned with the basket, and hunted in it for a button.

"You don't go out like that," she said severely. "Not if I know it."

"You've all the makings of a bully," complained Hugh, submitting. "What would you like to do today ?"

"Well, I shan't have time for much, what with all the packing," she answered.

"Oh, damn the packing ! I'll do mine."

"Indeed you won't !" she said indignantly.

"Precious, I don't want you to slave over my things."

She snipped the cotton, buttoned his shirt, pinched his chin. "That's just what I love doing, Hughie. But I needn't pack till after dinner. You choose what we shall do."

"Hire a car and drive out to Pisa," he suggested.

"Yes, that'll be lovely," she agreed. "Go and finish dressing, and while you're 'phoning for a car I'll see what the Guide Book says about Pisa."

"No, for heaven's sake don't ! It only tells you who built what, and when, and you'll recite it all to me. Which I couldn't bear. Let's be perfectly ignorant."

"Ah, but you're not !" objected Laura.

"Well, I don't know dates, anyhow," Hugh said, vanishing into his dressing-room. A minute later he put his head into the room again. "Imagine standing in front of the Leaning Tower and solemnly saying: 'This was erected in 1215, by — ' "

"But it wasn't," Laura said, looking up from the pages of Baedeker. "It was erected in — "

Hugh gave an unearthly sound and disappeared. Laura chuckled, and continued to study the guide book, partly for her mind's good, partly to tease Hugh.

CHAPTER VII

BENEATH the window ran the cobblestones, up the steep hill that led to the open country. They were rounded and worn very smooth; under the clatter of horses' hoofs they echoed noisily, and between them a few weeds poked up inquisitive heads. Heat danced before Laura's eyes, and the white wall opposite was bathed by the sun a mellow gold. A gate, set in the high stone wall, was vivid green against the white, like the shutters of the house beyond. Over the wall Laura could see the roof of this house, and if she stood on tip-toe on her balcony, just the top of one green-shuttered window.

They had stayed at Siena a fortnight, and then they had come out to this village, not far removed from the town. All the time they had been here Laura had not once seen anyone come in or out of that green door. The house possessed an odd attraction for her; she wanted to see behind the wall, where the tree tops nodded and whispered together. She made fairy pictures of the unknown garden, and in imagination planned each room of the hidden house. Mimosa swept the wall in dusty yellow balls; the scent of it, warm and very sweet, came up to her now at the window. She thought it was the scent of dreams.

Toiling slowly up the hill came a horse and cart, with tinkling bells on the harness, and a driver who sang softly and lazily to himself. They passed under the window, the reins hanging slackly on the old horse's back, plodded on, and presently were out of sight round a bend in the cobbled street. Laura half closed her eyes,

listening to the drowsy song, growing fainter and fainter in the distance, and to the tinkle of the bells.

"How lazy I am !" she thought. "I ought to do some sewing, or write to mother."

She was too sleepy. She sat on in the sunlight, lapped in quiet dreams, waiting for Hugh to come in.

Hugh had taken out his paints today, and had gone up the hill to sketch the little church that was there. Laura had waved to him from the window, and he, turning, had kissed his hand and called gaily: "Back to tea, darling !" Somehow that had filled her with a new happiness that warmed her heart. In these casual words the husband spoke, and the bridegroom was for a while forgotten. Laura loved the bridegroom almost fiercely, yet the husband was more dear.

A smile curved her lips as she thought of Hugh. Surely no other woman had had so dear a lover. She thought of his clean strength, and the sparkle in his eyes, the glint of gold in his hair, and the quick smile on his lips. Then her mind went on and dwelt upon the masterful ways of him, and the boyishness that showed itself in his flashes of sulkiness, of jealousy, and, when these were done, the sudden, passionate repentance. She adored his frailties, for they seemed to bring him down from his god-like heights to her level. He was impatient, sometimes unreasonable, extravagant, often careless. She might gently chide, but as each fresh fault in him was made apparent her love grew, and became protective, and full of understanding.

Suddenly she rose and went to the mantelpiece, and stood staring at the photographs upon it. There was the folding case which contained the portraits of her own parents, but she did not look at these; her eyes were on the lady in the leather frame who was Hugh's mother. She tried to fathom that pretty, smiling face, yet could see no further than the frivolity, and the daintiness. How young she looked ! She might almost be Hugh's

sister. Laura picked up the frame and looked closely, and it seemed as though the wide, innocent eyes grew hard. She put the photograph back into its place, and turned from it with a sigh. The soft smiling mouth might not smile when Mrs. Salinger met her daughter-in-law.

Then Hugh came in. "Hullo, sweetheart! I made sure I should find you asleep. By Jove, isn't it hot?"

She pulled up a chair for him, and hung over it, her momentary depression gone. "Did you start your picture?" she asked.

"Rather! D'you know, Laura, I really believe it's going to be good! This place is a positive inspiration." He paused. "Or is it you?"

"Oh — !" She blushed, and set light to the spirit stove on which she boiled the kettle for tea.

"It's you and the place all muddled up together," said Hugh. "I want to stay here for years and years with you, and if you disappear I want to leave at once."

She paused, tea-caddy in hand. "Do you mean that about wanting to stay, Hughie? Really?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"I feel as though I'd like to live here for ever."

"All right, we will," said Hugh fatuously. "Sure you won't be bored?"

"I shan't. But you?"

"I don't think so. I can paint, and I might write. Laura, it'll be much better fun than wandering from place to place! We could take a villa."

"Could we?" she asked breathlessly. "That would make it quite perfect."

The suggestion had been an idle one, but at once Hugh became enthusiastic. "It would. I'm tired of hotels, and having meals in public, and sitting in a bedroom whenever we want to be alone. I wonder whether we could get hold of a furnished house?"

Laura made the tea. "There's just one thing," she

said. "Oughtn't we to be going home soon?"

"We don't happen to have a home, darling."

"You know what I mean. Doesn't your mother want you to go back?"

"Oh lord, no! Mater's perfectly happy so long as she has her Bridge. Anyway, she's got Joyce to keep her company. I don't live in her pocket, you know. There's no need for us to go back till we feel like it. Do I want tea, or don't I?"

She waited, holding out the cup and saucer. "I don't," said Hugh. "But I shall have it all the same. I had a long and cooling drink downstairs with the *padrone*. Which reminds me!" He jumped up. "I say!"

"What?"

"Laura, I asked him about the house over the way, and it's empty!"

"Hughie!" she gasped. "You don't mean — to let?"

"Furnished, and complete with caretaker!" said Hugh. "The owners are away. They couldn't let the place, but I believe it's still on the agent's books."

"But how — Why couldn't they let it?"

"I believe the rent is fairly stiff, and old Jacopo says they're particular about their tenants." He had seen Laura's face fall, and a delightful plan formed in his brain. "So although I'm sure we're very desirable tenants I think we mustn't set our hearts on it, my dear."

"No, of course we mustn't," Laura said instantly. "I — I hadn't, really. It's sure to be awfully expensive."

" 'Fraid so," said Hugh mournfully. They did not talk about the house of dreams any more.

"I'll have some more tea," announced Hugh presently, "and then I'll walk into the town to — to have my hair cut."

"But it doesn't want cutting," she said, surprised. Then she thought that perhaps Hugh wanted to be by himself for a while, though it was rather strange, con-

sidering that he had been alone all the afternoon.

Enlightenment did not come until the following week, when Hugh, palpably agog with some delectable secret, laid a long envelope on her lap, and said casually:

"That's a present for you, darling."

"For me ?" she said. "A present ?" She looked up at him, and saw that the sparkle was in his eyes. "I believe you're pulling my leg !" she said suspiciously. Then, as he shook his head, she drew a document from the envelope and spread it open. It was a contract, she knew, but it was written in Italian, and she could not at once read it. With knitted brows she puzzled over it, and at last said: "*Casa* — Then it's a contract for a house ?" Hugh nodded. "*Via Palloni* — Why — why, that's this road !" Again Hugh nodded. The document fell to the ground. "Hughie, you don't mean to say — It isn't — it can't be — *the* house ?"

"Oh, can't it ?" said Hugh. "Why not ?"

She caught his arm. "Hugh, don't tease ! It — isn't *really*, is it ?"

"It really is," Hugh replied solemnly. "The house of dreams is ours for the space of three months. Oh, and the caretaker too !"

"Ours !" Laura struggled for words. "Hughie, you've been and gone and taken that house without ever having seen it ?"

"I saw it yesterday, when you were resting. It's not only beautiful but it has a bathroom. You'll love it, Laura. There's a fountain in the garden."

"I can't *believe* it !" she cried. "I just *can't !*"

"What, that there's a fountain ?" he said, smiling. "But there is. Orange trees too. Come over and see."

Laura had already pulled on a hat. "You're mad, Hughie !" she said, with a little excited laugh. "Fancy you going and taking a house — Oh, I can't believe you have really !"

"But I have. Do you remember the day I went to

get my hair cut? Well, I went to the agent then. Only I wanted it to be a surprise, so I didn't tell you anything about it till the bond was sealed, signed, and delivered. Is it a nice surprise?"

"Oh my dear, it's the loveliest, loveliest surprise!" she said, hugging him. "But the rent!"

"Isn't your affair."

"But it is, dearie! If it's too expensive I'd much, much rather not have the house! Hughie, I don't want you to spend money on me like that."

"The rent is perfectly reasonable," said Hugh unblushingly.

So they went to look at their first house.

The green gate opened on to fairyland. Laura cried out, and squeezed Hugh's hand. The garden was a riot of colour, of sunlight and shade. Roses, full blown, trailed over the walls of the house. Under the scented lime trees were wooden chairs, and over the fountain the mimosa hung its head. A paved walk led between flowers from the gate to the deep loggia that ran the length of the house. And all round the garden was the wall, with fading wistaria in heavy showers upon it, pale mauve on the white stone, sweet-scented.

"Hugh, Hugh, I never guessed it was as beautiful as this!" Laura whispered. "The flowers! Oh, the flowers!"

"Our Garden of Eden," Hugh answered. "I knew you'd love it. Come into the house."

The caretaker met them at the open door, an old, wrinkled woman, black-eyed and sallow, dipping a curtsey. Laura stammered her few words of Italian, and waited for Hugh to translate the soft, voluble answer. The Signora was welcome; she would find all in good order. Would the Signora look at the house?

The rooms led one from the other, with folding doors flung wide. In silence they went over the polished floors, and at last Hugh said:

"The man who furnished this is an artist."

"It's much too big," said Laura. "But how lovely !"

"You can be happy here ?" Hugh asked. "Is it indeed the house of dreams ?"

"Oh, it is more than that ! I *couldn't* have dreamed this !"

They moved in on the following day, and Emilia's niece, Bianca, a shy, smiling girl, came to act as parlour maid. Laura and Hugh dined alone that night for the first time in their married life, in the low room that led out of the salon, with shaded candles on the table, and around them warm shadows.

"Mr. and Mrs. Salinger at home," said Hugh. Then, all at once, his flippancy left him. He raised his glass. " 'And in her eyes the forest pool,' " he quoted softly, and drank.

"What did you say ?" inquired Laura. "It sounded like poetry."

"It was poetry. I was drinking to your eyes."

They smiled across at him merrily. "Hughie, you do do such dear things !" Laura said. "Was it your own poetry ?"

"No, I wish it were."

"I've never had anyone say poetry to me before."

"I should jolly well hope not !" said Hugh, coming quickly down to earth. "Let's have coffee on the loggia."

They went out into the garden, arm in arm. The stars twinkled in the deep blue overhead, and the night caught up all the scents in the garden and mingled them together for these lovers' delight. Faintly through the dusk the fountain shone white, and the waters in it bubbled and sang. Laura stood looking out on to her domain, and a drooping yellow rose kissed her hair. She put up her hand and the petals showered about her, and settled at her feet.

"Oh !" she said distressfully.

"My God, how beautiful you are!" Hugh whispered.

She flung a smile over her shoulder. "It is the garden."

"It is you! You are the perfect bloom in it."

Then Bianca came out with the coffee and liqueurs, and set them on a table beside two chairs. They sat down, with the rose-light of the salon lamps behind them, and the silver-light of stars above.

The perfumed night, creeping slowly in upon them, induced a mood of sentiment. Hands met and clasped, and very quietly Hugh said: "If I had known there was you in the world, waiting for me, I — would have waited too."

He had never spoken of his life before she entered it; she had never questioned. Hers was an open book for him to read if he so willed, but his, being a man's life, she did not expect to know. She said nothing now, but pressed his hand, and would have left the subject. But the vein of sentiment in Hugh was at work; that, and the vein of drama, never quite absent.

"I've wanted to tell you — I don't know how — "

"You mean," she said gently, "other women?"

"Not such a one as you!" he answered swiftly. "Not one I loved."

"You needn't tell me, Hughie. I'd rather you didn't. As long as you didn't love — another woman. I couldn't bear that."

"You don't mind, then, that there were — other women?"

She was silent for a moment, looking ahead. "Not that exactly, Hughie. I wish — I wish there hadn't been, but I understand — I always understood — that there must be. I can't quite explain. If you didn't love them they don't affect our life. Do you see? I mean, if you'd loved — like you love me, that would get between us. Get into our love, and — and spoil it. Because I'd know I shared your love with someone else. No, not

quite that, but — but someone would have known it before me. I want that part of you to be my very own."

"It is," he told her. "And since I have known you I've wished to God I hadn't messed about with those other women. I didn't know whether you guessed. Somehow — tonight — I couldn't bear you to think I was like yourself."

She carried his hand to her lips; there was a sob in her voice, for she saw only the nobility of his confession, and not the heroic sense behind it. "Oh, my dear!"

"I was afraid you might be offended — disgusted — hate me."

A ripple of laughter came. "I couldn't hate you, dearest."

He looked at her gravely, in wonderment. "Couldn't you? No matter what I did?"

She shook her head. "Not even — not even if you stopped loving me," she said. "That is the worst thing you could do to me, Hughie."

CHAPTER VIII

THEY had lived in the house a month, very happily, very simply. The sketch of the church was finished; Hugh had begun to paint the fountain, with the green-shuttered house beyond. He had scribbled some verses, too, love poems to Laura. She kept them in her little jewel case, and thought them beautiful. She did not quite understand them, but they spoke Hugh's love for her, and were therefore precious. She supposed they were wonderful, because she thought all he did was that. He talked of publishing them; privately he considered they were rather good, and he would like his relations to read them, and to know that they were written for his wife. He pictured them in yet another slim volume, finely printed on thick, rough-edged paper. He would dedicate the book to Laura: that would look very well. He sketched the letters on a half-sheet of notepaper. To My Wife. Yes, decidedly it was imposing. He was glad that he had married Laura. Till now he had not considered whether he was glad or not; probably, he thought, this was because the glamour of marriage had so blinded his mind that he was not able to think of anything except that he loved her. But two months had passed now, and he felt that it was time he paid attention to other things than romance. He began to debate within himself on their future: where it should be, and how conducted. Laura would do as he wished; more than that, — she would want the thing he wanted. He thought they would live abroad, at least for some years. There would be visits to England, of course, but their permanent home should be in Italy: Rome, perhaps, or perhaps here.

A letter had come from his mother only two days ago, complaining of his long absence. He picked it up now, and looked at it dubiously. It was impossible that they should go home yet. Another two months would complete their tenancy of the house; they could not afford to forfeit the rent for those two months, even supposing they wished to do so. They could not very well afford to pay the rent at all, Hugh reflected with a wry smile. But he intended to reply to Lord Salinger's letter, just three months old, today, and he would tell him, tactfully, how matters stood.

Hugh realized with a start that it was not so easy as it had been to ask his uncle for money. He supposed he had offended Salinger by his marriage, although Salinger had not so much as hinted that he was angry. It was the tone of the letter that gave Hugh pause, with its faint satire, almost its sneer. Perhaps he had misread the letter, and imagined disapproval where it was not. He would read it again now that he could do so dispassionately. At the time of its arrival, he remembered, he had been morbidly afraid of condemnation. His mother's letter was a different matter. There could be no misreading that, but he supposed her animosity was aroused more by the fact of her only son's marriage than by the social position, which, after all, she could only suspect, of his bride. Even she had contented herself with the one letter of reproach. She wrote now to ask when he would bring his wife home; she suggested that they would wish to look for a flat, and invited them to stay with her in Hans Place. Looking at this letter again Hugh thought how wise he had been to leave the first unanswered. He had allowed his mother time to recover from the very natural shock his precipitate marriage had caused her; now she wanted to see her daughter-in-law.

Hugh frowned; he did not want to take Laura home yet. He had thought before his marriage that it would

be easy to polish her manners, to eradicate the gentility. It had not been easy. He knew that time after time he had drawn back from the task of correcting her. Since the occasion at Florence when he had shown her how to hold the coffee pot he had not criticized her directly. Sometimes, when she misused a word, he made up his mind that he would tell her; while he hesitated the moment passed. He would tell her next time. Her unclouded happiness defeated him; it were cruelty to spoil it even for one minute. His criticism, be it never so gently made, brought the shadows into her eyes, and made her remember that she was not his equal. Her remembrance reacted on him. He could forget when they were alone together; with him her little common ways could not signify; they had not the power to distress him. But when he forced himself, for the sake of the future, to pull her up, they both remembered, and the gulf opened, just a crack, enough to show them that it was there and might grow wider.

In other ways he endeavoured to show her her mistakes. When she spoke badly he would repeat the sentence as it should be. She said: "The stain on the carpet won't notice now, will it?" He replied: "No, it won't be noticed."

She did not understand; she did not perceive the amendment; he had not the heart to make her see.

There was another reason why he hesitated to correct Laura. She did as he requested, as he showed her; she was careful never to forget, but she did not do it naturally. The coffee pot was in his mind. She no longer held her little finger crooked in the air, but sometimes, when covertly he watched her, he wondered whether it had not been better to have allowed her to continue to crook that little finger. It was genteel, but was it more awkward than her present method? The custom of years had taught her to hold her cup one way; now she could not forget that way, and every time she lifted a

cup she remembered it, and unlearned it yet again. There was something painstaking about the way she poured tea nowadays; if he corrected her speech perhaps her spontaneity would go from that too. He had noticed the tiny pause she made before pronouncing the word "ought." She made very few slips; it was seldom that the fatal "did" preceded the word; but she had to think first, and then the frank simplicity that had so fascinated him was gone from her manner, and a slight constraint crept in.

He knew that she studied him, trying to see a difference in his conduct that she might copy. But she could not see that it was her finicking ways that were wrong. She looked for vulgarity in herself, and came to think each easy, natural thing she did vulgar, and tried to rectify it by an excess of gentility. She did not understand.

Hugh bit his lip, puzzling over this. Refinement was her ideal; ideals, he thought, were not easily destroyed. Quillinan had said that; Quillinan possessed a queer knack of seeing down to the root of things.

Laura was never vulgar, but sometimes, Hugh knew, she thought that he was. He had seen a shocked look in her eyes: once when he drank his tea out of the saucer because it was too hot and he was thirsty, once when he made some remark which she thought coarse. She had said nothing, but she had been surprised, and rather worried. Suddenly Hugh hoped that she would not copy him and drink her tea out of the saucer. For he knew, all at once, that if she did it it would be vulgar.

He was in a dilemma; whether he corrected Laura's faults or let them pass, the result would not be as he wished. Either she must be natural, and keep her charm, or she must become strained, careful in her deportment in a way that could deceive no one.

It was early yet to give up hope of ultimate perfection. Perhaps in time Laura, so eager to learn, would

acquire the habits of his order by association with him: acquire them without knowing that she did so. The taught lesson was useless.

There were her standards too, so widely different from his. He had told her once, laughingly, that the god she worshipped was the little god of respectability. Very gently she had answered that he ought not to talk like that. He found that she was very religious, and once, unwisely, he embarked on an argument. She said unhappily: "There are things we can't understand in the Bible, Hughie. We just have to believe."

"Such as Jonah getting swallowed up by the whale," he said. "He did, didn't he, or am I muddling him up with the gentleman whose sock-suspenders 'you must *not* forget' ?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"'*How the Whale got his Throat*' — *Just So Stories,* darling, which you must read. Didn't Jonah go down into the warm dark cupboards of the whale's inside ? Or is that Kipling again ? Yes, it is, and he made a grating with his raft and his jack-knife, and tied it in place in the whale's throat with the sock-suspenders. It knocks Jonah into a cocked hat. Where was I ? Oh, yes, believing. You can't understand, first, how Jonah got into the whale, unless, of course the 'noble and generous cetacean' hadn't yet had his throat made small by the Mariner, whose Mummy had given him leave to paddle — Laura, I must get the *Just So Stories* for you !"

"If they make fun of the Bible I'd rather you didn't."

"They don't, you solemn person. Look here, about Jonah ! He is supposed to have been swallowed up by the whale, isn't he ? How on earth did he manage to come up again, not a bit the worse for wear ?"

"God was with him, you see."

"What, in the whale's tummy ?"

She flushed painfully, and turned away.

"Laura !"

"You shouldn't say things like that, dear. It's — it's blasphemy."

"But yours is a very Low Church attitude, my darling," he said.

"I expect I am what you call Low Church," she answered quietly.

"As long as you're not Chapel I'll try and bear it," he said.

"Why shouldn't I be Chapel ?"

"Good God, you're not, are you ?"

"No. But why shouldn't I be ?"

"My dear, it's so plebeian."

She looked an inquiry; the term was new to her. He reddened uncomfortably. "Never mind."

"Do you mean common ?" He was silent. "I don't see that religion can ever be that, Hugh."

"Perhaps you are right." He wanted to dismiss the subject; she had said no more.

There were also her interests. They lay in the everyday things of this world: in the management of her house, in sewing and mending, the ordering of meals, economy, and the tending of her garden. She liked, too, to know that someone had walked from John o' Groats to Land's End in so many days. She would speculate on it, and say admiringly: "Fancy !" He bought her books to read, and tried to educate her taste. He gave her *Major Vigoureux,* and when she had at last come to the end of it, and he asked her how she liked it, she answered: "It's a very pretty tale. But that Vashti — !"

"You don't care for her ?"

The stern look came into her eyes. "I don't think she ought to have carried on as she did. Of course it's all right in a book."

She read everything he gave her; he was careful to choose for her only the best books. He put *Vanity*

Fair into her hands; it was three weeks before she had finished it, and then she said: "Well, of all the really bad lots! Why, there's hardly a good person in the book!"

"There's Dobbin," he pointed out. "And Amelia."

"I don't call her good," answered Laura briskly. "Giving up her child like that. Oh, she cried a lot over it, but you may depend she was sick of looking after him. I know what a kid of that age is, and *she* wasn't good for much."

He roared with laughter, but in his heart was no mirth, only a sickening sense of impotency. Laura read the story, not the style. It was the same with art. She delighted him at first with her admiration of the Old Masters. Then he discovered that she liked these pictures because they were holy, and very often portrayed the Infant Christ.

All this was in his mind as he sat at his desk now, the ink on his pen grown dry. He wondered whether the awakening of the critical faculty in him meant his love's waning. He cast the thought from him with scorn; there could be no more inconstancy. He was willing to admit that in the past he had been inconstant, but that belonged to his youth's wildness, which he had resolutely put from him. When he had married Laura he had seen the new life stretch before him, more solid than the old, more stable. The wild oats were sown; he looked back on the careless days with a whimsical smile. They could return no more, since it was his fixed determination that they should not. In their place he had love, and the dearest woman in the world to wife. It was not regret for the passing of the irresponsible years that he felt, for it was time they were done. He would not evade the yoke of the staid future, but he regarded it with a kind of comical alarm, and wondered how he should maintain respectability.

With the present he was sufficiently content, but he

could see in the tomorrow a dawning boredom. Today was the period of his honeymoon; there could be no infidelity of thought in looking beyond this time. He saw his honeymoon as an interlude, too idyllic to last — the holiday of life. It must end, and though he might feel a sentimental sadness at its demise he knew that it was inevitable.

He considered for a while the promise of the years to come. He would not be sorry to mix with the outer world again, and to enter once more into the pleasures which his set enjoyed. Seclusion, he pondered, led surely to decay. He wondered whether already stagnation had started in him. The world slipped by while he stayed in the paradise Laura had made for him; books were written that he had not read, and his friends discussed them; plays were produced that he had not seen. A wave of nostalgia passed over him; he would like to be in London tonight, when Masterman's new comedy was presented. His eyelids drooped over sparkling eyes; he ran over the names of those who would be at this first night. Amongst some of his intimates there would be a supper party after the play, hot argument, and the give and take of words.

Exhibitions too: Seymour Allardyce's water-colours were to be shown at the Leicester Galleries. So-and-So would be there, at the private view, and So-and-So. The Eton and Harrow match was over; was it possible that he had not even remembered the date? Goodwood was drawing near, the last event of the season he had missed. Next year — His thought stopped, chilled by realization. These idle plans could not include his wife. He tried to picture her at the party the Carismaines would give after the play tonight, and writhed under the flail of his own imagination. She would only feel bewilderment at the light, jejune wit; ignorant of art and literature, she could take no part in the discussions of the latest book, and the latest play. Her opinions, if she

dared to give them, mundane and full of commonsense, would fall like lead into the middle of amusing preciosity.

England, that part of it to which he belonged, was closed to him. Till now he had not known it, but in this moment of prescience he knew that he could more easily bear a temporary exile than to take amongst his friends a wife of whose breeding and learning he could not be proud.

This, then, was the cost. He had sacrificed much for his love; he felt a little sorry for himself, but behind the self-pity was the comforting conviction of having done the right thing. There should be no regrets, and no backslidings; he had married Laura, and he would live for her, because it was right, and because he loved her, and wanted to live for her. It would be a surprise to his family. They thought him fickle, and lacking in ballast; it would be a triumph to show them — and Quillinan, so dogmatic in his disparagement — that the leopard could, after all, change its spots.

He dipped his pen in the ink again, and began to write the letter to his uncle.

CHAPTER IX

"YOU MEAN," Laura said, "live abroad altogether ?"

"Don't you think it would be nice ?"

She did not answer at once, but looked at Hugh in a puzzled way, seeking the solution of this riddle in his face. Over their heads the lime trees made a canopy, and before them the fountain murmured. They could hear Bianca in the house, singing to herself. "But why ?" Laura said presently.

"Because here you are mine. At home I'd have to share you."

"How ? I don't see that."

"Oh, all one's friends butting in !" he said vaguely. "I shouldn't see so much of you."

"There's your mother, and my mother," she reminded him.

"My dear, a man cleaves to his wife, forsaking all others, or words to that effect."

She smiled. "Yes, of course, but that doesn't mean that he goes away to live in another country."

"You don't want to ?"

She considered. She did not like the irregularity of the plan he suggested, but Italy was the land of their love, and held her in clinging arms. "I want what you want."

"That's no sort of answer," Hugh said. "Tell me what you feel."

She sat forward in her chair. A leaf fluttered down from the tree; she caught it, and stayed twirling it between her fingers. "I'm not a bit good at explaining what I mean," she remarked.

"Never mind, try."

"Well, Hughie, it's like this: — in some ways I want to stay in Italy, with you, all our lives. Because we've been so happy here, and *alone*, like you said. Not seeing anyone, and not having to do anything except what we wish to do. There's one part of me that wants to go on just as we are now, for ever and ever."

"And the other part ?"

"Well, that wants to stay too, but it knows that we ought to go home."

"Why ?"

"Perhaps because we want to stay so much," she said seriously.

He threw his cigarette away. "I don't understand that. I should have thought it was the best reason of all for staying here."

"Just doing exactly what we want to do ? Oh no, Hugh, you know it isn't ! It isn't good to do only what you like."

"I have always done it."

"I don't expect you have really."

"And is that your only reason for wishing to go home ?"

"Oh no ! That is, I want to do what's best. You see, Hughie, if we stay here for always we shan't see any of our friends, or our people."

"You'd miss that ?"

"I think you would, dear. It's all very well now, but you haven't been used to doing nothing and seeing nobody, have you ? And you've got your friends, and you don't want to lose them. Not really. Then, too, it wouldn't be good for either of us to go on like this all our lives. Lazy, that's what it is. There are lots of reasons."

"Then let's have them."

"Well, as I say, there's your people, and mine. They

won't like not seeing anything of us. Your mother, for instance. Naturally she wouldn't like it if you was to live abroad."

"Laura, you know very well that this is all eyewash ! You want to stay here as much as I do."

"Yes dear, I do, but I know — I *know* that it wouldn't answer ! I'd be happy enough, but it's different for you. A man wants something more than just love. And — and I'd rather go home now, when we both want to stay here so frightfully, than — than go when p'raps we're sick of it, and bored. I don't know if you can understand ? This part of our life is so perfect I don't want to spoil the memory of it. I want to be able to look back on it as the very happiest time of all. I don't want to stay till it isn't wonderful a bit, but only — dull."

"But why do you think we should get bored, my darling ? Love does not die."

"No, but it can get cold, just because you're bored. You wouldn't be happy for long. You'd keep thinking about what was happening at home, and wishing you could be there. Now wouldn't you ?"

"We can at least give it a trial," he said evasively. "There's plenty to do in a place like Rome. As for friends, we shall make new ones."

"But what do you want to throw away the old ones for ? I thought you meant that you didn't want other people, and now you talk of —" She stopped, and the leaf she had been twirling slipped from her fingers to the ground. "I see. It's me."

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about !" he said sharply.

"You'd be ashamed for your friends to meet me."

"It's a lie !"

"It isn't, Hughie. I was silly not to see it at first. Oh my dear, my dear, you did wrong to marry me !"

He seized her wrists and passionately kissed her soft palms. "Don't talk nonsense! How dare you say such a thing?"

"You wouldn't want to live abroad if I was your sort," she said sadly. "You'd want to show me off."

"I want to keep you to myself! That's my only reason. I don't want the ordinary social life, because it must separate us. I must have you near me always!"

"I've spoiled your life," she said.

"You *are* my life! If you want to go back to England we will go. Tomorrow, if you like!"

She shook her head. "No Hughie, we'll stay. We must. Till you've taught me to be — a lady."

"I can teach you nothing, my queen!"

"You mean, you won't. Why won't you, dear? I shan't be offended if you tell me when I do wrong. I want you to tell me. How will I learn if you don't? I keep wondering what I ought to do different — "

"Don't, Laura!"

"But I must. You see, dearie, I don't know when I'm being common so you'll have to tell me. I expect I'm too old to pick it up on my own."

He knelt by her chair, and buried his hot face in her lap. "I love you, I love you!"

"Well, there you are," she said, gently stroking his head. "All the more reason for you to help me. If you'll only catch me up when I go wrong, and tell me the things I ought not to do I'll be behaving as I should in no time."

But he knew that he could not do it, that he would never do it, because it was so unpleasant. She saw that she distressed him; her heart ached for him, and she said no more. Peace came to them again in the garden; they planned the future, while the mimosa tossed its golden balls, and the fountain sang for them a little bubbling song.

"It's like living in a scent bottle," Hugh remarked.

"Assorted flowers, and you call it *Rêve d'Amour*."

"That's just what it is. The mimosa . . ."

"No, it's the roses I smell."

She smiled secretly. "The mimosa. The dream scent. It's that I smell always, because it means you."

"A dry, hot, sweet smell," he teased. "Gold dust. You buy it in the streets of London, sixpence a bunch."

"You don't see it like a yellow shower in the streets of London," she retorted. "You don't have the scent of it under your window."

"I give in," said Hugh.

Upon reflection it seemed to him that they had come to an *impasse* in their lives. He could see no way out; the only thing to do, he thought, was to wait for events to shape their destinies. He did not see that he could do anything to ease the difficulties in his path; the best course was to worry no more, but to trust in Providence. His resolve to live abroad would astonish no one; he was not conventional, as his friends must know.

It was scarcely a week later that he met Jack Crawley outside the Post Office in Siena. A voice said: — "Good lord, it's Salinger!" He turned to see Crawley in the driving seat of a touring Crossley, with Gabrielle, his wife, beside him.

Hugh was delighted. He shook hands with them, and stood on the curbstone talking until Gabrielle suggested that he should go back with them to their hotel. It transpired that they were motoring through Italy and were staying in Siena only for a week.

"How awful of us not to remember!" Gabrielle said, in the wide lounge of the hotel. "We must congratulate, mustn't we?"

"Of course, of course!" Crawley nodded. "Very sudden, wasn't it, Hugh?"

"Not so very," Hugh answered. "I should like you to meet my wife."

"That will be charming," said Gabrielle. "Tell me what she is like, Hugo. Very pretty ?"

"More than pretty," he said. "You must come and dine with us. We've got a villa just outside the town."

"I should love to, but I don't think we ought to intrude into a honeymoon. No one intruded into ours, and I'm sure I should have been dreadfully cross if they had."

Hugh insisted that Laura should write to suggest a day. And then Laura was forgotten awhile in quick questionings, and the laughter of old memories. Hugh stayed to tea with the Crawleys and went home in the dusk, with his head full of London talk, and London news.

Laura stood on the loggia, with her face turned towards him. She came swiftly down the path to meet him. "Hugh, how late you are ! I couldn't think what had happened to you !"

Her words showed him his bonds; he answered impatiently. "My dear girl, what should happen to me ? Surely you haven't been worrying ?"

Her hands fell from his. "No dear, of course not. I guessed something must have kept you."

He put his arm round her waist and walked with her to the house, repentant of his momentary ill-humour. "I met some friends," he explained. "The Crawleys. Have you ever heard me speak of them ? Awfully nice people. They're staying in Siena until Thursday."

"Why, how jolly for you !" she said. "Funny you should run across them like that. Did you have tea with them ?"

"Yes, and asked them to dine with us here one evening. You don't mind ?"

She was filled with trepidation, but she knew that she must meet his friends and bear their scrutiny now, or later. "No, I'm very glad. What day did you ask them for ?"

"I left that to you. You'll write an invitation to Gabrielle, won't you ?"

"Is that the proper thing to do ?" she asked.

"I believe it's wonderfully correct. Gabrielle is charming, Laura. You're sure to like her."

The letter to Gabrielle was written under Hugh's superintendance, and dispatched that evening. A graceful acceptance of the invitation was received next day, and the arduous task of compiling a menu now presented itself. Laura, mistrusting her own judgment, sought Hugh's advice.

"Hors d'œuvres, I think," Hugh said. "Then soup, fish — entrée — "

"Good gracious, Hughie, surely we don't need to have all that ?"

"Well, what are your ideas ?"

She had none. "Oh, I don't know ! I thought perhaps soup, and omlette, and then meat. Cutlets, or something like that."

"That's all right, but we might have a bird."

"Hughie, they're not worth the money, really they're not ! Skinny little things ! I wonder the man isn't ashamed to sell them."

"Never mind; get two if you think one isn't enough. Better have two in any case."

"But they cost — "

"Laura, I don't want to know what they cost."

"Yes, but I'm not going to run you up big bills, my dear."

"I don't mind the bills. The only thing I do mind is bothering about expense, and being economical."

He spoke irritably, and she knew that further remonstrance would only lead to a flash of temper. "Very well, Hugh. And after the chicken ?"

"Just what you like. I don't know much about sweets. Iced fruit isn't bad. If we have a savoury — "

Laura laid her hand on his knee. "Hughie, I don't

want to be disagreeable, but if we're going to have a savoury as well Emilia and me will be cooking all day. We'll have the iced fruit, and little sweet biscuits, and then coffee. Won't that be enough ?"

"Yes, I should think so. Anything you like."

"And the wine ?"

"Oh, I'll see to that ! Sherry with the soup; then claret. And port with dessert."

Laura could see the workhouse ahead; horror was in her face. "Do people always drink as much as that ? I can't. Need I ?"

"No, you'll have whatever Gabrielle has. Oh, and cocktail !"

"My dear," said Laura solemnly, "you'll have me absolutely tight."

He laughed. "Not a bit of it. You needn't finish anything, you know, but you must have it, or Gabrielle will feel she can't."

"Oh well, if I needn't finish it — !" Laura said dubiously.

The day of the dinner party dawned brightly for Hugh, as it brought with it a suitable cheque from his uncle, accompanied by a short note.

Salinger wrote:

Alleyne Court, Sussex,
June 28th

Dear Hugh,

If the enclosed cheque doesn't cover the sum of your present embarrassments, don't hesitate to tell me. I am sure you won't. I rather wish that you would return; Ronald is dreaming of new fences. My compliments to your wife.

Salinger

This was all that could be desired; in a burst of enthu-

siasm Hugh exclaimed: "Uncle Charles is a sport!"

"Is he?" Laura said, looking up from a letter that had come to her from Gladys. "Why?"

Hugh held up the cheque, then folded it and slipped it into his pocketbook. Laura put down her letter. "Hugh — you didn't — *ask* him for money, did you?"

"No, I didn't exactly ask for it. I — er — hinted that I could do with some." Hugh smiled.

Laura could feel her cheeks burn; she pressed her hands to them. Perceiving this inexplicable shame in her, Hugh's eyes widened. "My dear girl, what's the matter?"

"I thought you had money of your own."

"So I have, but precious little."

"How much, Hugh?"

"Twelve hundred a year."

"Twelve hundred! But that's rich! Good gracious, we can live on half that!"

"Live on twelve hundred a year?" echoed Hugh. "It wouldn't keep us for six months."

"Hughie, of course it would! Why, my sister only has three hundred and she's got two small children as well. If only you'd told me before I'd have managed much better. I don't know what your uncle must think of me. Anyway, I'll see we live within our income now." She smiled cheerfully across the table, but Hugh was frowning.

"Twelve hundred isn't our income. Naturally my uncle allows me something."

"Does he? How much?"

"Eight hundred."

She gasped. "How very generous he must be! That makes us millionaires!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Hugh. "Eight hundred doesn't mean much to Uncle Charles. He's very well off, you know."

This casual acceptance of Salinger's bounty shocked Laura. "But it isn't as though you're his son, dear, is it ? I call it very good of him."

"He's very fond of me," Hugh said, in explanation.

"I should think he must be. That makes two thousand a year. We can't possibly need all that."

"We need much more," he said, rather sulkily.

"Oh no, Hughie ! I can't think how we've spent it all."

"Well, there's this house for one thing, and we haven't been living exactly cheaply."

She clasped her hands, and unclasped them, nervously. "It's on me that you've spent all that money ? I wish — oh, I wish that you hadn't ! I didn't mean to be an expense to you. All those hotels we stayed at — I *knew* we ought to have gone to cheaper ones ! And the things you've given me ! As if I needed them ! Darling, you don't want to go spending fortunes on me. It's not as though I came out of a big house and was used to having lots of things. And it doesn't make me happy to see you being extravagant for my sake. I'd much, much rather you didn't do it any more !"

Hugh felt slightly uncomfortable. "It hasn't all been spent on you," he said. "It hasn't all been spent at all. There's still some left."

"But a great deal of it was spent on me, Hughie, I'm sure. Look at that bracelet you gave me ! And I don't want your people to say you've got a bad wife, now do I ? Having to go to Lord Salinger for money — oh, Hughie ! Why didn't you let me know ?"

"That'll do, Laura. It's nothing new for me to write to Uncle Charles. He won't imagine it's your fault." Hugh laughed shortly. "He knows me too well."

"It's not that so much as — Dear, I can't bear you to ask him for money, when he's been so generous and all !"

Hugh got up, rasping his chair on the polished floor. "My dear good girl, there's nothing to make such a fuss about. If I can't take money from my own uncle, who can I take it from ?"

"You might make it," she said in a low voice.

"My profession isn't exactly remunerative," he answered grandly. "Art seldom is. I presume you don't expect me to go into business ?"

She wilted before his sarcasm, but replied bravely. "I'd rather you did anything than — than live on your uncle."

"Oh, don't be so *bourgeoise !*" Hugh said, and went out of the room.

Laura sat very still for a long time after he had gone; then, slowly, she picked up her letter and went on reading it.

Dear old Laura [Gladys wrote.] *I hope this finds you well, etc. ! Things are looking up a bit here, as Henry got a rise out of his firm last week. Not before it was time, is what I say, but I suppose we must be thankful for small mercies. I've had to get rid of Emma, she was a slut if ever there was one, and it seems to me I spent half my time running round after her, what with one thing and another. I miss having you come in and set things to rights like you used to, but I expect you're quite above that sort of thing nowadays. Your villa sounds very nice. Thank you for the photos. Mr. Salinger isn't a bit what I expected, but then hardly anyone ever is, are they ? The one you sent of yourself makes you look a bit fat, but my eye, you've got some nice clothes these days ! ! ! Well, you've always had all the luck, not but what you deserved it, I'm not saying you don't.*

Mother was saying the other evening it's a bit queer you staying abroad such ages. I suppose you'll be com-

ing home sooner or later. Must stop as have to catch the post.

Much love
from
Gladys

P. S. Harry and Baby send love and kisses.

There followed a pencilled line of shaky crosses, which brought a smile to Laura's lips.

Hugh came tempestuously in from the garden. "Laura, I'm a swine! It was a filthy thing to say! Dearest, dearest, don't cry!" He caught her roughly in his arms, murmuring incoherent apologies. She dried her tears shamefacedly.

"I'm sorry," she said simply. "Can't think why I cried. I don't generally."

"I ought to be shot!" he said. "I didn't mean it!"

She patted his hand; he whispered tenderly: "What are you going to wear tonight, sweetheart?"

"I haven't thought," she replied.

"The red silk!" he coaxed. "To please me."

"Isn't it a bit too — too loud?" she suggested. "For such a small party?"

"No, not at all. Do wear it!"

"All right, Hughie. As long as you're sure it isn't too dressy."

But when Gabrielle walked up the path that evening Laura knew that it was not "dressy" enough. She felt provincial all at once, and a moment ago, with Hugh's eyes upon her, she had thought that she looked her best.

Hugh had gone down to the gate to meet his friends; he led Gabrielle towards the house now, with Crawley following behind them. Laura heard laughter, and a high-pitched, inconsequent voice.

"Hugo, how perfect! How did you find it, and what is it that smells so sweet? Oh, do you think the car will be safe? It's behaving so abominably, and it

landed us in the middle of nowhere this morning, and wouldn't consent to go for quite twenty minutes. I thought we shouldn't be able to come this evening after all, and altogether it was tragic. And then the car started again, so that we are here. Which is lovely."

They came into the light that streamed from the windows of the house; Laura saw a small shingled head, and big eyes.

"My wife," Hugh said proudly.

Laura held out her hand; Gabrielle took it between both of hers. "How do you do? It is so nice of you to ask us like this. What fun for me to meet Mrs. Hugh Salinger before anyone else has seen her!"

"So glad you were able to come," Laura said. "It's a great pleasure, I'm sure, for us. . ."

Crawley shook Laura's hand warmly. "How do you do? What a fascinating spot you live in!"

"You ought to see it by daylight," Laura told him. "Oh, it's too lovely!" She turned to Gabrielle. "Would you like to come and take your things off, Mrs. Crawley?"

"Yes, please. And I do so want to see the inside of your delightful house. . . Oh, how charming!"

"I like it, don't you?" Laura led the way across the hall to the shallow staircase. "Of course, it's not really very convenient, but then you can't have everything."

"This would be quite enough for me," Gabrielle said. "Why, you've an Empire bedroom! Why didn't you warn me? How marvellous of you to find such a house! . . . Is that one of Hugh's?" She stood before the painting of the church, and looked at it critically. "He's improving, isn't he? That must be your work."

"No, he did it all himself," Laura said. "I don't paint."

Gabrielle shot a swift glance at her. "I am sure you were the inspiration. Is it oleander that I smell?"

She darted to the window. "Heavenly! This must be the garden dear old Omar sang in. Or was that in Persia? Never mind; it must have been exactly like this one." She flung her cloak on to the couch, and searched in her handbag for powder and lip-stick. Laura watched in amazement while she rubbed red on her lips, and dusted her face with powder. Quite unconscious of the surprised gaze upon her Gabrielle patted and pushed her short hair into becoming order, and turned, a little slight figure in a sleeveless frock whose severe lines accentuated her slimness. Laura felt overgrown and blowsy beside this elegant small lady.

"Now I'm ready," smiled Gabrielle.

Downstairs Hugh had handed Crawley a cocktail.

"Here's luck!" Crawley said. "Likewise congratulations."

Hugh flushed with pleasure. "Thanks."

Then Laura and Gabrielle came in, and Gabrielle sank on to the divan, and crossed her silk-clad legs. "What is it, Hugo? Martini? Yes, please. I've been admiring the house. You must wake up wondering whether it's true. I should expect it to fade away with the dawn."

"It never does," Hugh answered. "That rather destroys the fairylike illusion, but it's more satisfactory in the long run." He sat down beside her. "You look very jolly, Gabrielle."

"That's quite the wrong thing to say," she replied. "I'm on a recuperative tour, so you ought to say, Poor thing, how pale you are!"

"But you're not," Hugh pointed out. "If you were you wouldn't look so nice."

Laura sipped dutifully at her cocktail, which she did not like. She felt tongue-tied and stupid, but she forced herself to speak. "Are you staying long in Siena?" she asked.

"Only until Thursday," answered Crawley. "We're

heading for Sicily, where we shall probably be cooked alive."

"What part of Sicily are you going to ?"

"Well, we thought of travelling all over it," Crawley said.

"Of course you have a car. It must be very nice."

"It is until the car gets cross," said Gabrielle. "Her name is Katharine, because she is a shrew, and Jack's Petruchio, only he can't tame her at all."

"Oh, come now !" Jack expostulated. "Barring that breakdown outside Grenoble she's gone very well indeed. If you hustle a new car you must expect some sort of trouble."

"It's a Crossley, isn't it ?" Hugh said. "Never driven one. What are they like ?"

They became absorbed in mechanism, and presently Bianca entered the room and beamingly announced that dinner was served. They went through the folding doors into the dining-room, and sat down at the table. Hors d'œuvres were handed round, and a silence fell, uncomfortable, and hard to break. Hugh, looking across the table at Laura, felt that it was for her to set the ball of conversation rolling. His mother would have done so at once, or his sister.

Gabrielle selected several olives from the dish. "Can I be greedy and eat more olives than are good for me, please ?"

"Oh, yes ! I mean, I hope you'll help yourself," Laura said. "I'm glad you like them. I think they're so bitter and nasty."

They discussed olives, Spanish and French, until there seemed to be no more to say on the subject. Gabrielle filled the pause that followed. "Do you know Italy well ?" she inquired.

"No, I haven't ever been here before," Laura answered. "We went to Florence first. I liked that very much."

"Your first visit to Florence! How gorgeous for Hugh to take you there! What did you feel? I wish I could go to Florence for the first time again: I remember I sat down by the Ponte Vecchio and thought about poor darling Bondelmonti till I wept large salt tears. Do you remember your Villani, Hugh? He says that Bondelmonti came over the bridge dressed all in white, upon a white palfrey, and the Lamberti and their hateful relations slaughtered him by the statue of Mars. It was too pathetic, and his beautiful white clothes made it seem worse."

"Heavens, yes!" said Hugh, laughing. "And Mosca de' Lamberti spake the evil word. Which sounds so sinister."

"That was when they made up their minds to slaughter him. Maurice Hewlett wrote a delightful story about it. What was the name of it? Do you know, Jack? Oh no, I'm sure you don't!"

"I don't know anything about those old johnnies," Jack said placidly. He addressed his hostess. "Never can remember who lived when, or what he did."

"I think history is very difficult," Laura agreed. "Especially Italian history. Hugh told me about the Medici, and he tried to tell me about the Bianchi and the Neri, but even he couldn't remember quite how it went."

"Somebody — oh, wasn't it the Cancellieri of Pistoia? — cut off the hand of somebody else's son, and all Italy took sides, Aren't I clever to know?"

"No, not a bit," said Hugh rudely. "We all know that much. Tell us who was Black and who was White, and what they did, and why!"

Gabrielle collapsed.

"What's happened to George Carruthers?" Hugh asked presently. "Mater wrote that he'd rather dropped out, but she didn't say why."

"Oh my dear, don't you know?" Gabrielle cried. "He's living with Maisie Trent."

"Silly ass!" commented Crawley. "God knows what he saw in her."

"Well, there was enough of her to be seen," Hugh remarked. "When did it happen?"

"April, more or less. B'lieve Maisie's left the stage for good." He looked at Laura. "Did you ever see her? Revues, you know."

"No, never," Laura said. The topic made her feel uncomfortable, but she tried to appear interested.

"Clever, of course," said Jack. "Hubert Andrew's wife."

"They gave up acting together some time ago," Gabrielle said. "But I never expected George Carruthers to go off with her."

"Poor old George!" said Hugh. "I only hope she'll inspire him to write a novel that isn't deadly dull and respectable."

"I should think she would," Gabrielle said. "Which would be a good thing. Did you read his last? It was awful."

"Yes, the young man prayed for guidance. I was enthralled, because it was so exactly George himself. All very serious and tiresome."

"If he prayed for guidance before mucking up his life for Maisie he seems to have got onto the wrong number," Jack grimaced. He lifted his glass. "Well, I feel it's up to me to say a few kind words, only I can't make a decent speech to save my life, so I'll just say, Many congratulations, Hugo, and may you both have all the luck there is."

"And lots of happiness," Gabrielle added. "Here's to you both!"

"Thanks very much," said Hugh. "I've two toasts. One is our guests —" He made a mock bow, and

Laura, feeling that she should drink this health, did so, with a shy smile. "The other," Hugh went on, "is to our first dinner-party."

"Cheers for the first dinner-party!" said Jack. "Very successful too."

"Isn't it fun?" Gabrielle sipped her wine. "I am enjoying myself! Thank you for my nice party, Mrs. Salinger."

Laura thought this a strange thing to say in the middle of dinner; at the end of the evening it would be more proper. She smiled politely, and hoped that no one would talk of coming divorce cases any more.

"Are you going to stay here for ever and ever, or are you going to the Lido with the rest of the crowd?" demanded Gabrielle. "The Vanes are getting up such a cheery party. Isn't it a shame my horrible doctor-man won't let us join it?"

"Oh, have you been ill?" Laura was all sympathy. "I'm so sorry!"

"That's very sweet of you, and it makes me purr inside. The doctor-man called it a nervous breakdown."

"Which, being translated," interposed her husband, "means too many cocktails and late nights."

"It doesn't at all," said Gabrielle, with dignity. "It means boredom. Oh, we went to see Hylliard's new tragedy, and it was the worst thing that ever happened. There were four acts, Hugh, — yes, really there were! — and Lorna Prayle drank a cup of cold poison in the last one."

"Oh, was she playing?" Hugh said, interested. "Did she moan?"

"She did," nodded Jack. "She also wheezed. My God, how she did wheeze!"

"My dear, it was the most ghastly show," said Gabrielle. "Not a line worth remembering, not a thought that wasn't hackneyed and played out. William Whiteman was the lover, conscientiously mediocre, and

Tremaine was the husband." She looked at Laura. "He's rather wonderful, isn't he ?"

"I'm afraid I've never seen him," replied Laura, and felt that she cast a blight. "But I've heard of him, of course. A friend of mine saw him in *Greater Love*, and she said he was very good. I saw the play when it was filmed, but it wasn't Tremaine in it. Well, he doesn't act for the Pictures, does he ?"

"No, I don't think he does," said Crawley. "Are you fond of cinemas, Mrs. Salinger ?"

"Oh yes, awfully ! That is, I like theatres better, but they're more — " She saw Hugh's anxious frown, and stopped. "It's wonderful what they can do on the films nowadays," she ended lamely. "It quite takes your breath away."

"I'm ashamed to say that I haven't even seen Charlie Chaplin," remarked Gabrielle. "Is he really very funny ?"

"Yes, very. Fancy you never having seen him ! You ought to go, really you ought !"

"I must," said Gabrielle. Then, suddenly, she became aware of the fact that both she and Laura had finished dessert some time ago, and that Laura ought to give the signal for their departure. It was quite evident that Laura had either forgotten, or did not know that she should do this. A glance at Hugh's face told her that he too was waiting for Laura to rise. He looked worried, as though he were trying to think of a way to make Laura understand that she must get up and leave the room now. Gabrielle felt intensely sorry for them both. She would not mind staying in the room until they all went out together, but she could see that Hugh would mind very much. He wanted this party to be conducted with all possible decorum, probably to show his guests that his wife was perfectly well acquainted with the rules that governed society. Under her light chatter Gabrielle thought hard, and presently broke off

in the middle of a sentence, and pushed back her chair, hoping that what she was going to say would deceive Hugh.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Salinger! I didn't notice that you were trying to catch my eye. I've been talking so much that I quite forgot that it was time we left these two poor male things alone."

Laura rose, looking in some little bewilderment at Hugh. He nodded almost imperceptibly, and Crawley went to open the door. The two women passed out together.

"Clumsy," thought Gabrielle. "I hope Hugh didn't guess what I was doing."

"Shall we go on to the loggia?" asked Laura. "Hugh and I usually have coffee there."

"That will be quite perfect," Gabrielle said. "What comfy looking chairs! Why, you've even got a fountain! I do think you're lucky to have such a lovely home."

"It isn't really our home," Laura sighed. "We only have it furnished. Will you have a cushion at your back, Mrs. Crawley? I hope you don't feel a draught?"

"No thanks, not a bit."

A silence fell. Alone with Gabrielle Laura was consumed with a nervousness that was far greater than the nervousness she had felt when first she met Quillinan. For Quillinan, after all, was only a man and he would not notice all the things another woman must see. She thought that Gabrielle's quick eyes had observed every defect in herself. All through dinner she had watched Gabrielle and had seen a thousand differences in her deportment, differences she felt that she could never emulate. Everything that Gabrielle did was faithfully committed to memory. She would practise holding her knife as Gabrielle held hers; she would try to acquire that graceful carelessness that characterized Gabrielle;

and she would try to talk easily, and of nothing.

"What do you do with yourself here all day?" Gabrielle asked, breaking the silence. "It's glorious, but you can't live on mere scenery. At least, I can't."

"There isn't very much to do. I have the house to see to, and the mending, and that. I expect you'd find it rather dull."

"I don't suppose I should if I were on my honeymoon."

Another silence fell, and then Gabrielle said that Bianca had clearly stepped from the pages of Boccaccio. Then she wished that she had not said this, and dashed into an account of her tour. And very soon, for with the departure of their wives constraint had somehow fallen upon them, the men came out, and coffee was brought, and presently Hugh suggested that they should play poker.

CHAPTER X

HUGH went down to the gate to see the Crawleys off. There was laughter, and the humming whirr of the self-starter. Gabrielle's voice called a parting remark, and the car slid forward down the street.

Laura looked round the room, and began, mechanically, to tidy it. There were crumbs on the floor; cushions were tumbled, and chair-covers creased. On the baize table the cards lay scattered, and an ash-tray overflowed at one corner. The room smelled of smoke, killing the scent of the mimosa. Laura collected the empty glasses, and set them on the tray.

The noise of the car died away in the distance; there was silence again, but these depressing traces of the visitors were left. It was past midnight; Laura felt very tired and strangely forlorn.

Hugh came slowly up the path, and entered the room through the long window. He did not say anything for some minutes, but absently selected a cigarette from the silver box on the table, and lit it. Laura stayed by the divan, smoothing the crumpled loose cover; she did not look at Hugh.

"Well," Hugh said at last. "We'd better be thinking about bed."

"Yes," Laura agreed, but lingered still. She was looking at Hugh now, rather drearily.

He yawned. "Did you like Gabrielle ? You seemed to be getting on very well, I thought." His voice, his very words, were a pitiful pretence.

"I like her very much," Laura said. "She was very kind."

"I think it went off well, on the whole."

"Oh yes! It was great fun."

They were cheating one another, but each knew what was in the other's heart. They could not speak of it, but stood apart, in miserable silence.

"Well," Hugh said again. "Bed. Don't wait, old thing. I'll follow you."

"All right." She went to the door, and paused there. She wanted him to say something, to bridge the gulf. He could not; he tried to find words to comfort their unhappiness, but they would not be spoken. He smiled. "Run along, darling. You look fagged out."

"I am rather tired," she answered. "Don't sit up long, will you, Hughie?"

"No, I'll just put the cards away."

She nodded, and went out. The door shut softly behind her.

Hugh sat down by the table and began to pick up the cards. The evening had not been a success. Conversation, light on the surface, was strained beneath, and they had had to play poker, which Laura could not grasp, to alleviate the strain. There was Laura's failure to leave the dining-room after dessert. He had not been deceived. Gabrielle knew the truth. Out of kindness she had played her little game of pretence, but Hugh saw through it, and her kindness was gall and wormwood. After dinner she had brought her conversation down to Laura's level, but Laura, shy and ill-at-ease, could not talk. Even her manner underwent a change: all spontaneity left her; she was forced and artificial. She had endeavoured to talk as Gabrielle talked, but the pose was alien to her nature, and became her not at all. Yet he could not tell her that; it would be too cruel. She was trying so desperately to be and do what he wished; he could not bring himself to say that her old ways were better than the new.

He wondered whether his present feeling was shared

by her. To a great extent he thought it must be. Distress had been in her eyes just now; an inarticulate pleading for his patience and his clemency. He sat very still, holding the cards in his hands. In his wretchedness he knew that hers was the sharper pain; she had failed in this first trial, and because she had wanted to succeed not for her own sake but for his, failure was doubly hard to bear.

The dinner-party had shown Hugh the chasm that now separated him from his own kind. He had made it himself, but he had not known how deep and wide it would be. In Laura it was not only speech and mannerisms that were at fault. Daily, hourly, the things she did not know seemed to grow more numerous. He could never hope to teach her for it would not occur to him to tell her, for instance, that she must rise from the dinner table before her husband. That was a typical example of the things he took for granted and of which she was ignorant. He had been bred up in these ways, so that he never gave them a moment's thought; she knew nothing of them.

He could not teach her the art of conversation: she did not know his friends; she had seen nothing, and she had read nothing.

He put the cards away, and went upstairs. Laura was in bed; he thought she looked pale, and her eyes were heavy. He bent over her, and kissed her very tenderly. Her arms went round his neck; she clung to him for a moment, and then pushed him gently from her. "Awfully sleepy," she said, with a little smile.

So they did not talk tonight, but lay in the darkness with closed eyes. For a long time only their light breathing told that each was awake; then, at last, Laura turned, and her breathing grew slower and heavier.

Hugh could think, now that she slept. While she lay wakeful beside him thought was impossible; he kept

his mind away from the day's happenings because it seemed to him that if he allowed himself to think of them she must know it.

He lay on his back, staring towards the window where the faint grey light of dawn shone, and he sent his imagination into the future and heard in his brain Gabrielle's voice telling the tale of this dinner-party to her friends and his. Gabrielle was warm-hearted; she had been kind tonight, but Hugh knew that she would not be able to resist the prompting of the little imp of malice. No one could. She would be amusing; that was her business in life. She would exercise her powers of mimicry, and people would laugh, and be sorry for "poor Hugh Salinger."

He set his teeth, for this hurt his sensitive vanity. There had been pity in Gabrielle's face at parting; he could not bear that. Gabrielle thought that he had made a mess of his life; perhaps she spoke of him now as she spoke of George Carruthers. Inevitably he had dropped out . . .

"Hugh Salinger? My dear, haven't you heard? He's made the most shocking *mésalliance*. His wife's quite impossible. Where on earth he picked her up — ! Oh, my dear, if you'd *only* been there the evening I saw her! It was too pathetic, but you know, one couldn't help seeing the funny side of it. Of course she's perfectly lovely to look at. I suppose that's what caught Hugh. There certainly wasn't anything else to attract him! She can't even speak the King's English. Oh, it was too devastating! I didn't know where to look. How Hugh can have been such a fool . . . !"

That was what Gabrielle would say, only she would say it much more funnily, and she would add: "I feel so *sorry* for him!"

He was in a sadder plight than Carruthers, for it was unlikely that Carruthers would marry his actress, so that

after a decent interval, when Maisie was cast aside, he would enter the world again and no one would remember his indiscretion.

His own indiscretion was far worse; he had married his love in all honour, and so he must drop out. His friends would say: "Oh, we can't ask the Hugh Salingers! *She's* so awful!" For his mother's sake, perhaps for his sake, and because of Lord Salinger, people would officially receive them. They would be invited to the large formal functions, to garden parties and balls, but from the smaller, intimate parties they would be excluded. They would not be asked, on the telephone, to "come along to Claridge's tonight," any more than they would be asked to "come and dine with us tonight, and make up a Bridge four."

The grey light had warmed to opal, and still Hugh lay awake, in bitter thought. They would never be able to go home to England; they had broken the Social Law, and there was a price to be paid. And while they stayed in loneliness abroad Laura would not learn the ways of Society, because that knowledge came only from custom, and experience.

He turned his head and saw her face in the pale, dim light. It was peaceful in sleep, and so beautiful. Her white breasts rose and fell slightly, and across them a great rope of her hair lay, ruffled and black on the smooth skin. One hand was upturned on the pillow; he just could see the pink-tipped fingers, curving a little inwards, prettily, in repose. On her cheek her eyelashes lay like a shadow; her lips were parted; he wanted to press his own mouth to them, but he dared not for fear of waking her. Then, as the light grew, he saw the curve of her cheek, and the fullness under her chin. As she lay now that fullness seemed to be accentuated; his gaze went from it to the rounded arm, peeping above the sheet. He hoped, uneasily, that this ripe magnificence would not turn in a few years to coarse fat. She

was built on very generous lines, and she was only thirty, after all.

He grew ashamed of his fear, and put it from him, telling himself that it was not her beauty that he loved, but the soul of her, sweet and innocent, and very true.

They were careful next day not to talk much of last night's party, for when they mentioned it constraint crept between them; there was so much that must be left unsaid. And then, as the days went by, it drifted into the region of the past. They did not forget it, but time softened the memory of its discomfort, and there were other things to occupy their thoughts.

Gladys sent a photograph of herself, her children, and her husband. Laura tore the wrapping off eagerly and looked at it with delight.

"Well, if that isn't excellent! Hughie, look! this is Gladys."

Hugh came to look over her shoulder. He saw a rather blowsy young woman, holding a child on her knee. Behind her stood her husband, looking very self-conscious, and with his hair brushed up into a "Brutus." A little boy was at Gladys' feet.

"Is it — is it like your sister?" Hugh asked feebly.

"Yes, it's wonderful. It's not quite so good of Henry; it makes him look solemn, and really he's very jolly. Isn't Baby sweet?"

"It's no use asking me to admire the baby," he reminded her. "But I'm sure she is everything that it should be." An awful thought came to him. "Are you going to frame it?"

"Why, of course!" she answered.

He did not feel that he could live with this suburban group upon the mantelpiece of their room.

"My word, I shall be glad to see them all again!" Laura remarked. "How those kids have grown!"

"Do you miss them so much?" Hugh asked quickly.

She was still studying the photograph. "Well, I do a

bit, but that's only natural. It's — let me see — yes, it's eight months since I left home."

"If you were never to see them again," he said, watching her, "could you bear it ?"

She was a little startled. "Never to see them again ? What a horrid thing to think of, Hugh ! Of course I should be awfully upset."

"Would you ? Would you be inconsolable ?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine anything so dreadful as never seeing my family again."

"Supposing — just for the sake of argument — " Hugh said, "that you had to choose between them and me ?"

"I should choose you. But I — I don't have to, do I ?"

"Oh no !" But he did not say it very well.

"What is it, Hugh ? Why did you ask me that ?"

He went to the window, and knocked out his pipe. "Oh, I don't know !"

"You don't mean — you *couldn't* mean that you want me to give them up ?"

He was silent. She rose to her feet, with troubled eyes, and agitated breast. "I couldn't do that, Hugh. You — you wouldn't ask me to do a thing like that."

"Well. I haven't asked you."

"I don't understand. I wouldn't dream of asking you to give up your people."

"The cases aren't exactly parallel."

"You mean that my people are — common ?"

"Oh, look here, Laura, that'll do ! Don't let's quarrel over a thing I didn't even say."

"Ah, but you thought it, Hugh ! I'd rather you told me right out — what you mean. Do you want me to give up my people ?"

"I don't want anything so extreme. But when — if we go home you'll find that you're in a different posi-

tion. You won't be able to see them so much. You'll have gone beyond them. This all sounds very beastly and snobbish, I expect."

"Of course I know that now I'm married it'll be rather different."

"That's all right, then. Naturally you'll go down to see them sometimes, and — " he made a concession — "occasionally they'll come and see you. But — it's no good blinking facts, darling, and you've said it yourself so often — your people and my people won't — mix." He made a gesture of distaste. "Oh, this is simply foul !"

"So my people have got to go ?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You wouldn't give up yours for me, dear."

"Laura, that's different ! You know it is."

"It isn't, Hugh. You're asking me to do something mean — which you wouldn't do yourself."

"My dear, you exaggerate. I haven't suggested that you should drop them altogether."

"Oh Hughie, do you think I don't *know* what you're driving at ?" she said wearily. "I can see my people as long as I see them alone, and keep them in the background. They aren't to meet your people, they aren't ever to be seen. Dearest, you haven't thought how that would hurt them. They'll think I'm ashamed of them. And, Hugh, if — if I was good enough to be your wife my people are good enough for you to know."

"Laura, can't you see that it would be a mistake to try and drag them into our lives ?"

"No dear. The mistake isn't there. It's in our marriage. I — I see what you feel; I'm — sorry — awfully sorry — but I can't help it, Hugh. They *are* my people, and I can't be unkind to them. I'd do anything to make things easier, but that's mean."

He took her hand. "If our marriage was a mistake I at least am thankful for it."

She looked at him with wide searching eyes. "Will you always be ?"

"You know I shall."

She rested her head against his shoulder; a sigh fluttered past her lips. "It keeps getting between us, Hughie. The — the difference in our classes. We always come back to it."

He kissed her hair. "It doesn't really get between us, sweetheart."

"It seems to me, Hughie, that it's going to be terribly hard."

"As long as you don't regret it — "

"Oh, no ! I could never regret it for myself."

"Well, I don't, darling."

"No. Well — well, we're just being silly, aren't we ?" She looked up, smiling. "Making trouble, that's what we're doing. Let's go for a walk."

"Righto !" he said at once. "Oh Laura, we're really very happy, aren't we ?"

"Yes, Hughie. Awfully happy !"

She went upstairs to put a hat on; in a few minutes Hugh called to her from the hall. "Laura ! I say, Laura !"

"What ?"

"I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go into the town and buy a gramophone !"

This seemed a most delightful plan. "Oh, what fun ! Now ?"

"Yes. Buck up !"

She came running down. "And dance to it in the salon. The floor's just lovely. What a brain-wave, Hugh !"

So they set off to Siena, and bought a portable gramophone, and a quantity of records. It was quite imperative that they should take them home that very day, so they put them all into a cab, and drove back to the white house in state. The gramophone was not a par-

ticularly good one, but that did not matter, nor were any of the tunes new. After dinner they pushed most of the furniture in the salon into the hall, and took up the rugs, and danced.

"This is the first time I've ever danced with you," marvelled Hugh. "And you do dance well!"

"What about you?" said Laura. "I'm not up to your form, anything like. You must have danced an awful lot in your time."

"I have," Hugh admitted. "Do you remember the days when we used to do the Flying Angel?"

"No, what was it?"

"Throwing your partner over your head, roughly speaking," he grinned.

Laura chuckled. "It 'ud puzzle you to throw me over your head," she remarked.

"Is that a dare?"

"No, no! Look here, Hughie, I'm not going to do any Flying Angels! Outlandish, I call it, not to say indecent. Nice object I'd look, I don't think!"

"Well, do you know this step?"

She didn't know it, so it had to be taught her, with many other steps. And they forgot to wind up the gramophone, so that it ran down in the middle of a tune, and made the most painful noises, which naturally added to the fun. They danced on to the loggia and into the dining-room, out of the dining-room into the hall, and back again into the salon, where they collapsed on to the divan, quite breathless and exhausted.

"Do let me get you some cider-cup, Mrs. Salinger!" said Hugh affectedly.

A suitable retort came to Laura in a flash. "'I don't see any, said Alice.'"

"'There isn't any, said the March Hare.' Laura, how topping of you to know the immortal Alice! Were you brought up on it?"

"No, I won it as a prize, at school, when I was about ten. I used to love it."

"You mustn't say you only used to love it. You have to love it more and more as you grow older."

"Well, but it's awfully silly," Laura said. "But it sticks in your mind. If I can't have cider-cup, what can I have?"

"Let's go and forage," suggested Hugh.

So they went into the kitchen, and with three oranges and two lemons, some vermouth, and a cucumber, they concocted a strange but delectable liquid, which Hugh insisted on mixing in the cocktail shaker, with a large lump of ice. It wouldn't all get in at the same time, so they had to shake it in relays, and then Emilia, who had watched the proceedings in great amazement, produced half a pineapple from the larder, which of course had to be pressed into the service. This made it necessary to shake the liquid all over again, and by the time it was at last poured into the jug, Hugh and Laura were so hot and thirsty that they drank every drop, and thought it quite the nicest cup they had ever tasted. And then, since dancing would make them thirsty again, and there was nothing more to drink, they played *Pagliacci* and *Faust*, and the gramophone squeaked on all Caruso's top notes.

A week later the cable came. Hugh was seated alone on the loggia, for Laura had gone out shopping. He put down *Zadig*, and in surprise tore open the envelope. The words stared up at him, very clear and large.

"Roland had accident out riding. Died yesterday internal hæmorrhage. Letter follows. Mother."

"There isn't any answer," Hugh said mechanically.

CHAPTER XI

THE GATE shut with a click behind the bearer of this tragic message. Hugh looked stupidly at the cable in his hand; he did not immediately realize that his cousin was dead, for he could not imagine anything so extraordinary happening to Roland. Except when he had had measles at Eton, and had been wounded in the War, Roland had never been ill. Certainly he had taken tosses on the hunting field in his youth, but he had been none the worse for them. One might, with an effort, conceive of his being killed while hunting, but it was ridiculous that Roland, of all people, should be killed when exercising a horse at the beginning of the summer. It was not only unusual, but it was ignominious, and never in his life had Roland been either.

But Roland was dead, without doubt, and in this weird fashion. Hugh grew pale as it came home to him. There had been nothing more than tolerance between him and his cousin, but the news shocked Hugh deeply. Even now he could not quite believe that Roland was really dead; he was too virile, and too solid. The solidity of him seemed to make it more terrible. Roland loved life, the green life of the open country with the sharp wind from the sea blowing in his face, and the springing turf under his horse's hoofs. Hugh could not think of Alleyne with Roland gone. He was a part of it, born there, bred there, with the love and the pride of the land in his soul. It was his heritage, and he was dead.

Then, so suddenly that he was dazed, Hugh realized all that Roland's death meant to him. One day, perhaps not far distant, he, instead of Roland, would be the Eleventh Baron Salinger of Alleyne.

Never, even in his wildest dreams, had he thought that he might step into his uncle's shoes. The one life that stood in the way had seemed so secure. But Roland had inconceivably died, and all that should have been Roland's would now come to him. Hugh drew a deep breath; it was impossible not to feel a great excitement, an elation, at this incredible discovery. And with this throbbing elation came the pride of the land, bred into his race, not very strong in him yet, but there, at the root of his nature.

The name was his to perpetuate, and the glory of the long line. Until this moment he had thought that it meant very little to him. He had laughed at Privilege, and snapped his fingers in the face of Tradition. But he had not known then that he, even he, would join the ranks of the Salingers of Alleyne. Just now, in this moment of shock, Sentiment laid soft fingers upon him, and he desired above all things to maintain the honour and the tradition of his name.

The gate opened, and Laura came into the garden. She was hot, and her face was rather red; she carried a basket on her arm, and a straggling end of hair brushed her cheek. Hugh looked at her with new eyes, and saw her stripped of illusion, a woman of the lower middle class, beautiful and ignorant, knowing nothing of the ideals of his house, her outlook confined within the barriers of middle-class respectability.

"My, it isn't half hot!" she remarked, coming slowly up the path.

His eyelids flickered, and his hand clenched on the cable he still held. The voice within him cried: "If only I had *known !*"

"Is anything the matter ?" Laura asked. "You look

quite queer. You haven't been sitting in the sun, Hughie, have you ?"

"No." He hesitated, then spoke again, jerkily. "I've had a cable from my mother. Roland's dead. My cousin."

Death to Laura was very real. It was awe-inspiring, and terrible; she reverenced it. "Oh Hughie ! Oh my dear, I am so sorry ! No wonder I thought you looked queer ! Your cousin too ! Oh dear, when did it happen ?"

"Yesterday. He was thrown from his horse. I don't know when."

"Killed !" Laura sat down beside him, and took his hand in hers, and patted it. "Oh, what a dreadful thing ! I don't know what to say. Your poor uncle — I am so sorry ! It must have been such a shock to you !"

"Yes." He drew his hand away. "It was rather."

"Don't you take on, dear. It doesn't do any good."

He felt an overwhelming irritation. "I'm not 'taking on,' as you call it. I'm very sorry, naturally, but Roland and I didn't hit it off at all."

"Hugh ! What a way to talk ! And him lying dead — ! My dear, you are all upset. You don't know what you're saying."

"I am not upset. I can't pretend to be heart-broken about it."

"You mustn't talk like that, Hughie. It's — it's awful. He's your cousin !"

"That's no reason why I should like him. I'm more sorry for my uncle than anyone. Roland's death doesn't affect me — " He stopped. "In that way."

"Well, dear, I don't think you ought to say so. It's so heartless, that's what it is. I don't believe you really mean it. I can see it's been a shock to you."

"Yes. It has been a shock," he said, and rose to his feet. "I haven't quite grasped it yet. I suppose you

know what it means to us?" She looked blankly up at him; he gave a short, hard laugh. "It means, my dear, that when Uncle Charles dies you'll be Lady Salinger."

"M-me? L-Lady Salinger?" she stammered.

"I'm the heir."

She put up her hand to her head. "I — I never thought of that."

"No. But it is so. It rather changes things."

"I feel all topsy-turvy," she said. "You'll — you'll be Lord Salinger?"

"One day."

She sat silent, staring at him, her face redder than ever. "I — I think I'll go and take my hat off," she said at last, because just then there seemed to be nothing else to say.

When she joined Hugh again on the loggia she was grave and silent. He sat frowning across the garden, and his pipe had gone out. Laura had brought her work-basket, and she began to darn one of his socks. "I suppose the cable didn't say how it happened?" she asked presently.

"No. Mother's writing."

"I shall have to see about mourning," she remarked.

"What on earth for?"

"Well, it doesn't seem right to go flaunting about in colours when — "

"Look here, Laura, you've never set eyes on Roland!"

"No, but — "

"Then why this desire to go into black?"

"But, Hughie, it's your own cousin!"

"My dear girl, the only point in wearing mourning is to show people that you've lost someone, so that they shan't drop any bricks. As we don't know a soul here — "

"It isn't quite that, dear."

"What is it, then?"

"Well, it's — respect."

"For whom ? Roland or my uncle ?"

"Both."

"My uncle can't see us, (not that he'd want us to be in mourning if he could; he hates that sort of thing,) and Roland, if he sees us, won't care a hoot by this time. Or will he ?" Hugh knocked out his pipe. "I wonder if Roland, wherever he is, still retains his conventional instincts ?"

"Hugh ! For goodness' sake — !"

"I'd like to know where he is," Hugh continued ruminatively. "He can't have gone to the appalling place you call Heaven, because he'd think it the acme of bad form to sit about in flowing robes, playing on a harp. And he can't have gone to the other appalling place you call Hell, because for one thing he's a very good chap, and for another it's just as bad form as Heaven."

"Hughie, I can't sit here and listen to you talking like that. It's horrible !"

"I don't see why. I'm convinced Roland is somewhere, and I'm equally convinced he hasn't altered at all, so why shouldn't I talk of him as I've always done ? It's absurd to think he's become a saint suddenly."

"He's *dead*, Hugh !"

"Well, what is dead ? Just stopping ? You can't imagine that absolute finality. I think he's gone to another world of sorts, just as he might have gone to America. So I don't see why I shouldn't talk of him as though he were alive."

"It's different, Hugh."

"It isn't. Look here, when I'm dead and meet old Roland there won't be anything dreadful in talking to him as I'm talking now, will there ?"

"You won't want to."

"I bet I shall. If I've got a spirit why should it change just because the body it was temporarily in hap-

pens to die. It's much more likely to go on and on, probably improving in a gradual way."

"How do you know ?"

"I don't. I only go by what I can see. Which is evolution. Moreover if you're sure of being perfect as soon as you leave this world why bother about it any more ? You might as well let things rip, and have a damn' good time while you've got the chance."

"But you aren't sure of Heaven, dear. There's Hell."

"Good Lord ! So if I murder my mother, and embezzle a bank, I'll go to Hell ?"

"Yes," she said simply. "I — I wish you wouldn't talk like this."

"Bad luck on me, then," said Hugh. "Don't I get a chance to expiate ?"

"Oh Hughie, don't keep on at it ! I — I hate it !"

"I'm not surprised," said Hugh. "All right, I'll stop, but I do wish you'd be a little more enlightened. Oh, and while we're abroad we shall wear no mourning. Understand ?"

She loved the domineering voice he assumed. "Yes, Hugh. Just as you wish."

"Good girl. Now we'll sit and think quite calmly about our changed lives." He had talked himself into a good humour, and the frown had gone from his face. "The funny part of it is that I never imagined for an instant that I should come into the title."

"I wonder why your cousin didn't marry ?"

"I think he meant to, sooner or later. In fact, I know he did. Queer cuss, Roland. I'm not at all sure I don't wish there were a little Roland." He paused, and took his pipe out of his mouth. "That," he said carefully, "is not quite true. Because I shall like being Lord Salinger very much indeed."

She was oddly pleased that he too should know the feeling of elation. "Will you, Hugh ?"

"Yes. Well, naturally. I shouldn't be human if I didn't feel rather thrilled. It isn't exactly the title, though I suppose that does count, in my inmost mind. It's Alleyne, and all that Alleyne means."

"Go on."

"Nothing further to be said. It's going to be enormously jolly to be Salinger of Alleyne, and it is still more enormously jolly to be the heir when you never thought you would be. I've always had a certain feeling about Alleyne, but not very strongly, because it wasn't anything to do with me. But it is something to do with me now and the feeling's growing."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Difficult to explain. Roland had it. Love of the place — worship of it. A sort of absorbing pride. He just lived for it. You have to, more or less. Roland meant to marry and have children, not because he wanted to, but because it was his duty to Alleyne, and all the Salingers. It's tradition, largely. If you have the luck to be born a Salinger of Alleyne you've jolly well got to carry it on."

"You mean behaving as well as you can? Being good?"

"No, I don't mean that at all, though it was like that with Roland. His goodness — he was, awfully, and marvellously boring — was really from inclination. He liked being good. Uncle Charles is quite different. He isn't 'good' at all — I don't think any of the Salingers' morals were worth writing home about, unless you wanted to shock the family. But Uncle Charles is everything he ought to be as far as Alleyne's concerned. He's got the feeling for the place bred into him; he's a good landlord, and all that sort of thing, and Alleyne stands first with him. And he's always been immensely discreet. That's the secret of being a Salinger of Alleyne, I think."

"How do you mean?"

"Not to make a fool of yourself, not to create any sort of scandal. You mustn't get mixed up in divorce cases, or carry your wine badly, or marry a barmaid." He stopped, realizing what he had said, and then went on in a hurry. "It's all very ridiculous really, and — "

"Hughie, has a Salinger ever married — married beneath him — before ?"

"Oh, rather !" said Hugh airily. "The first Roland Salinger married a Roundhead lady who was the daughter of nobody knew whom. He was the brother of the Salinger who was killed at Naseby, and succeeded him."

"I don't suppose he knew he'd be Lord Salinger when — when he married her."

"I don't expect he'd have cared. It was a — "

"Any more than you knew," Laura said deliberately.

Hugh shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "You aren't a Roundhead," he countered. "That must have hit the family up badly, because we've always been staunch Royalists. We were even exiled. Twice. The Roland I was telling you about escaped after Worcester, and went off to fight in France. And Geoffrey Salinger was mixed up in the Forty Five, and lived abroad thereafter. We don't recognise the Hanoverian Succession until after the death of Henry IX, you know."

He had side-tracked Laura successfully.

"Who was he ?" she inquired.

For the moment they had escaped the real issue. But Laura had spoken his thought; if he had known that Roland was to die he would not have committed the indiscretion of his marriage. This knowledge, which he had not dared to admit, frightened him, for it revealed the limitations of his love, and he had imagined there to be none. If it could be jarred by this news of the change in his fortunes it must be an ephemeral emotion; and it had undoubtedly been jarred. At first he had not thought of her in his speculations upon the

future; that, in itself, was a flaw in his love, for his first thought on the realization of this new estate should have been of her. His brain had not considered her in the smallest degree, because in the honours that were to come to him she seemed to have no place. Then the green gate had opened, and she stood before him, and by her presence forced herself into his remembrance. His feeling at that moment had been of horror, stark and numbing. He saw her with the eyes of a stranger, and knew himself a fool. . It was a revulsion of feeling that staggered him with its very intensity. Until she came into the garden he had dreamed lightly of the future wherein he should not be the least of the Salingers. And then she came through the gate, so that the sight of her dragged him down to earth, and filled him with an unreasoning anger, and a hatred of her.

It passed, but in its stead was miserable resentment, and an uncertainty of desire. He could not wish the undoing of his marriage: he was firm on that point. He had married Laura, and having lived these months with her, in happiness, he could not wish to be rid of her. Yet he could regret that he had ever met her. Then, thinking of it, and remembering the happiness of these months, and the beauty of Laura, he felt that life without her would be empty and passionless. His mind groped tentatively towards a question of which he was ashamed: would it not have been better, after all, to have taken her as she herself had suggested ? Scarcely had he asked this question than his mind shied from it, tossed from this disloyalty to a fresh warmth. The contemplation as his mistress of the woman he had made his wife revolted him. Perhaps unwisely he had bestowed this dignity upon her, but wisely or no he had done it, and it had become part of her. It was not only his name that she bore, but his honour, and so he could not think of her as a mistress that-might-have-been without disgust, and a sense of outrage.

And yet, conflicting illogically with these sentiments, was his dual side, which reiterated that he had made a mistake that would cost him dear. The sickness of realization came; he fought against it in wretchedness of spirit. His love for Laura was sensual, a foolish, blind passion, apart from which he stood, unloving and unhappy in his inability to love. The physical love went on, but his soul was aloof; Laura had not touched it; and thus, while his senses still desired her, his soul cried out in impotent misery that he should have married her, and cool Reason pointed a derisive finger at his folly.

Reason told him that having met Laura he would have been wiser to have gone on his way. By now he would have forgotten, as he had forgotten other women. Thus Reason. But a less dispassionate consciousness in him doubted this, for he had never considered Laura in the light of his consideration of any other woman. His feeling for her, then, was deeper than mere frivolous desire; he could not have forgotten her, but he might have looked back now, unfettered, and thanked his gods that he had escaped marriage. For this he despised himself, and hated that imperfection in his love that made it possible for him to say: "I would not have it undone, but if it had never been I could be very thankful."

This was the Might Have Been; in the contemplation of it bitterness grew up, insidious and deadly. If he had not met Laura his position today would be so pleasant, and his future easy to arrange. A few more years of irresponsibility he might have allowed himself, and then would have married a woman bred up in the atmosphere of his class, understanding by birth all that Laura must try to assimilate through long, careful study. His subconscious mind placed Stella Hepplewhite in Laura's room, because she stood most naturally there; consciously, he thought of an abstract woman, and con-

trasted her with Laura. There would be nothing for him to teach, nothing to correct; he would feel no apprehensive qualms when she met his friends, she would speak his language, and her life would be governed by the same traditions that stood behind him, intangible, and therefore impossible to explain. Not only would his family approve her, but she would know his world, and be at home there. This meant the smoothness of life, which was precious to him, with no difficulties to be overcome, and no losing battles to be fought against Ignorance and Opposing Ideals.

She was the wife Reason would have chosen. Love might have played no part in the union: with Laura in his mind he thought that love must have played no part. Unaware of what the future held for him he had in careless blindness chosen Laura to be his wife. Had Roland lived he believed he could have been content.

He could not even hope that she would learn to be externally what Alleyne demanded. That knowledge was born but not taught. She would become no great lady; she would acquire no gracious dignity, nor ever lose the awkwardness of bearing that came of transportation into unaccustomed surroundings. It was impossible to picture her at Alleyne. Even now, at the height of her rich beauty, she would seem vulgar there. With shut teeth Hugh forced himself to imagine how much more so she would appear when beauty was done, and vigorous youth drifted into stout middle-age, commonplace and ignorant, and rather genteel.

He covered his eyes with his hand, appalled by the image he had conjured up. It was the first time he had looked into the future; he saw there disillusionment, and the bitter years; and in that moment cursed his folly. All his life he would pay for the fleeting happiness of these months, for deep in his heart he knew, and shrank from knowing, that when beauty went love would go too, and there would remain, even as Quillinan had pre-

dicted, only the husks of spent pleasure, not the quiet love of middle-life, not companionship.

And then he looked up, and saw Laura's wistful eyes. He stretched out his hand and in silence took hers, and presently kissed it, for love still lived.

CHAPTER XII

LAURA had supposed that Roland's death must mean Hugh's instant return to England, but in the end it was not until three months later that they at last left the white house in Siena. Following close upon that first cable had come letters from Alleyne. Hugh, reading Salinger's curt note, experienced a certain feeling of relief. Salinger did not yet require his return. Salinger told the bare facts baldly. There had been, it seemed, a narrow lane, a car speeding round the bend, a half-broken colt rearing in mad affright, and then confusion.

. . . *I daresay you will feel it your duty to come home,*" Salinger wrote. "*I don't want this. Fond as I am of you, you seem just at the moment intolerable to me. You will not misunderstand me. I think there was little but respect, and a certain friendship, between Roland and myself. I have found you more congenial. But I had pride in Roland, and, frankly, you seem a poor substitute. We have laughed at Roland, and found him insufferably dull, often priggish; but neither you nor I have in us one tenth of that virtue in him which placed him so far above us. I am not sentimentalizing; I believe his death hurts my pride alone. And yet I shall miss him.*

Come home in your own good time. There is a business side to this tragedy, but it can wait. Just now I prefer not to think of you or of any other in Roland's room. . .

So they had stayed on in Italy, and the moment of

homecoming that Hugh had grown to think an evil one, was put off just a little longer.

He had not shown Laura that letter from his uncle, for she would not have understood. And she, reading letters from her mother and from Gladys, full of excited comments on this change in her fortunes, felt that she could not show them to Hugh, because he would think them vulgar.

She acquiesced in his decision to remain in Italy: The future frightened her; she found herself clinging desperately to the happiness of the present. Once, unable to bear her troubled thoughts in silence, she turned to him, and said: "Hughie, I'm not fit to be Lady Salinger. I shan't know how to act. You can't learn those sort of things."

He told her not to worry, not to think about it. He was almost angry with her for thus forcing the uncertain future upon his consciousness. If she had uneasy forebodings, so too had he, and he did not want to dwell upon them. "Don't let's spoil our happiness by worrying over things ahead!" That was what he said, and thereafter she kept her counsel, and pursued happiness with him.

But it seemed that when you consciously clung to happiness the true bliss was done. In the months that followed there came sometimes tension, and the knowledge of unspoken thoughts between them to disturb the tranquillity of the white house.

Occasionally, too, there would come a stiltedness into Laura's speech, a careful artificiality into her manner. She said, blushing, that she must try to better herself, and was surprised to see his face grow white.

"Oh, my God!" he cried out, and almost rushed from the house.

When he came back it was to comfort and to caress her. Even as she clung to him, straining him to her in an agony of love, she divined something alien behind

his passionate kisses. It was self-hatred, and shame that he could think her so imperfect.

But when they left Siena at last, each felt that there had been nothing but happiness in the house of dreams; each knew depression; and each assured the other, forlornly, that things would always be the same.

They landed in England on a grey autumn day, and found London shining wet beneath a drizzling rain. They went to a hotel near Grosvenor Square, and Laura's first hope, upon seeing a quiet exterior, that this might not be too expensive, was speedily banished. She was shrewd enough to see at a glance to what class of hotel this one belonged, and her heart sank. Hugh had engaged a suite. She opened her mouth to protest against this extravagance, but shut it again with her words unsaid. Protests only annoyed Hugh. She must try to influence him gradually, tactfully.

At dinner that night Hugh was gay and bright-eyed. He had put Italy behind him; he felt himself at home again, and several times said, "By Jove, isn't it great to be back, darling ?"

She smiled and nodded: if he was pleased, then so would she be. She asked how long they were to stay in town.

"Oh, I don't know," Hugh said, filling up her glass. "We ought to go down to Alleyne as soon as possible, but I must see my tailor, and you'll want some clothes." A thought occurred to him; he was in a mellow mood, and could afford to be generous. "And you'll want to see your people," he said handsomely.

She glowed to his thought for her. "And will you come too ?" she asked shyly. "They'd be so pleased — and proud."

Somehow that jarred on him. He supposed that he would have to go. "Yes, I'll come," he said. "Of course." His face, momentarily clouded, brightened again. "I must buy a car," he said.

Laura gasped. "Lord, Hughie, do you want to end in the workhouse?"

"Not in the least," Hugh replied, rather curtly. When she remonstrated with him on questions of expenditure he felt himself draw away from her, chafed and alien.

She said timidly: "I don't mean to be a wet-blanket, dearie, but hadn't we better wait a bit?"

"Of course we must have a car," Hugh said. "Don't be silly, Laura. Anyone would think I'd threatened to buy a Rolls Royce."

Laura thought hopefully of an Austin Seven, or perhaps a Morris Cowley. But Hugh bought a Bentley.

It was no good saying anything, she thought, dismayed at the sight of this aristocrat among cars. Hugh was delighted with it: it was the best car on the road; it would do over eighty; did not Laura like it?

He was excited, like a boy with a mechanical toy. There was a sparkle in his blue eyes; his face, turned towards her, was eager, and expectant of her praise.

She admired, but there was a flatness in her voice, a reserve that spoke the qualms in her mind. She was wondering what the car had cost Hugh. He wanted her to be pleased, and her adoration for him made her wish to applaud his choice of car, to enter into his delight in it, to be at one with him. But fighting this yielding spirit was the sternness of her duty, the duty that made her think: "I mustn't encourage him to be extravagant." "It's lovely, Hughie, but—" she saw the quick frown that crossed his face, and could not go on. "Lovely!" she repeated. "I'm sure I never thought I'd go driving round in a car like that."

He turned away, pretending to inspect the car; he was afraid she might see how this last speech grated upon him. After a moment he said something in an unconcerned voice. It was no use being annoyed; it was even unfair. She would learn not to say these things.

She regarded him wistfully. Somehow she had erred again; she could not be sure where, and evidently he did not mean to tell her. She watched him straighten the mascot on the cap of the radiator, and forced herself into unwelcome speech. "You're cross about something, Hughie? Something I said?"

A slight flush burned in his lean cheeks; he looked up quickly, and she saw an expression in his eyes almost of dislike. "For God's sake, Laura, don't keep on dragging it up like that!" he said.

"I'm sorry," she faltered. She stood twisting her hands together for a moment, wanting to cry, knowing that she must not. As soon as she felt that she could trust her voice she said: "Well, are you going to take me for a run in the car, Hughie? I'm just longing to go."

The cloud vanished; he was smiling again. He told her to go and put on a hat. They would drive out into the country somewhere.

It was certainly not an auspicious moment to suggest to him that they should drive to Brixton though that had been her hope. She said nothing about it, therefore, nothing until they had returned from the drive and Hugh was in good spirits. She ventured then to tell him that she was writing to her mother to suggest Sunday for their visit. "You see, Hughie, they'll all be at home then — Dad, and my brother, and young May. I daresay Mother will ask Gladys and Henry over too."

"All right," said Hugh. He took a cigarette from his case, and lit it, his eyes lowered. "Though I rather thought of looking up a friend of mine. . . You don't think they'd prefer to see you alone the first time?"

"No, Hughie. That is — you mustn't be cross, dear, but I wouldn't like them to think you were too grand to go and see them. I'd have gone the very first day we got back if it hadn't been for that. You do see, don't you, dear?"

"Of course I see," he answered. "And I do wish you wouldn't apply that foul word to me."

"What word, Hughie ?"

"Grand," he said distastefully.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . So I can send the letter ?"

He assented, and the letter was posted. Almost by return of post came the answer. Mrs. Burton hoped they would come down to dinner and spend the day. Gladys and Henry would be there to make it a proper family party. She expected Laura would hardly recognize Harry, who, with Baby, would of course accompany Gladys.

"Oh, I can't hardly believe I'm really going to see them all again so soon !" Laura cried. "And Gladys' kids too !"

Hugh did not see that there was anything to be said in answer to this. The prospect of spending a day in Brixton amongst Laura's relations gave him an unpleasant sensation of sinking somewhere round the pit of his stomach. He tried to ignore it; he comforted himself with the thought that things were never as bad as one thought they would be.

They set out shortly after twelve on Sunday, in the car. It looked very new and opulent, Laura thought; she could not forbear a little exultation, a desire to show-off so magnificent a possession. She was ashamed of the feeling, afraid, the next moment, that her people would think her "stuck-up." She would have liked to wear the frock Hugh had bought for her in Paris, but she thought it looked too grand, and chose instead a tailor-made coat and skirt. There was a sable fur that Hugh had chosen only a few days ago. She thought she must wear that. It wasn't swanking; if your husband gave you pretty things of course you wore them.

Laburnum Avenue was a turning off the main road. Seated beside Hugh, and directing their course, Laura

looked about her with wondering eyes. It was all so familiar, and yet like something seen in a dream. Here was the tram-stop; here she had waited every day to board the car that took her to town. There was the dairy, surprisingly unchanged; there the grocer. It was a shock to see a new shop beside the fishmonger. She exclaimed at it. "That used to be Briggs', the ironmonger's. Fancy him going! What ages ago it all seems!"

"Well, it is rather a long time," Hugh said. He kept his eyes on the road before him. He did not want to look at the shops on either side; he did not want to see Brixton, which was so far, so dismally far from his own world. He swung the car round the corner into Laburnum Avenue, and beheld a vista of semi-detached villas, all built of dun bricks, with fanlights over the front doors, and blue slated roofs. It was not squalid; to him it was worse than that. It was drab and respectable, and very mean.

"On the right," Laura said. Her voice was unsteady with excitement. "Oh, it's just the same! Just the same! Stop, Hughie, here it is. Oh, there's young May at the window. No, she's gone now. She'll be coming to open the door, I'll bet." She sprang out, forgetting the parcels she had brought, forgetting everything but that she was home again with all her family just on the other side of that shut door.

Hugh switched off the engine, and followed Laura. The little iron gate squeaked as he pushed it open. He was cynically surprised to see no name painted in white letters on the fanlight over the door. The house should surely have been called Mon Repos, or Carisbrooke, he thought.

Since May had not come to open the door after all, Laura tugged impatiently at the bell. Almost immediately, as though she had been awaiting this summons in the hall, a small serving-maid opened the door.

Laura did not know her: Mrs. Burton had evidently got a new "girl," and quite as evidently the new girl had been carefully coached in her part.

"Where are they all ?" Laura said. There was a throb in her voice; Hugh heard it with vague disquiet. Did she then care so much ?

"Come this way, please, m'am," said the "girl" primly.

Hugh thought that the narrow hall smelled of oil-cloth and of roast beef. Ahead of the door the stairs rose steeply, covered with a red carpet. He followed Laura to a door at the side, heard the maid rather breathlessly announce: "Mr. and Mrs. Salinger, please mum," and had an instant's hatred of this farce, a feeling of revulsion, almost of nausea.

"The family" were posed about the room in careful nonchalance. They had put on best clothes and party manners to receive the heir to a barony. As the maid spoke Hugh heard a feminine voice raised in very artificial conversation, a voice that spoke with pinched vowels, and an excess of refinement.

But Laura went forward in a little rush. "Mother ! Dad !" She was in the arms of a stout woman, half crying, half laughing. Hugh's eyes, hyper-keen, saw black silk stretched tightly across an ample bust, black silk trimmed with bugles. His glance travelled on, seemed to himself to photograph the room indelibly on to the sensitive plate of his brain. There were looped curtains of Nottingham lace in the window, and a large aspidistra in a brass pot. There was a picture of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness; the wall paper was flowered with a design of sprawling roses, and there was an antimacassar on each chair-back.

By the window, apparently uncertain whether to come forward or to remain where they stood, were two men who must of course be Henry, and George, Laura's brother. George was dark, like Laura. He wore very light pointed shoes and a very startling tie. Hugh re-

membered Laura had once told him that George spent too much on his clothes.

In the middle of the room was Gladys, pretty in an untidy fashion, dressed in a pink jumper of artificial silk. Beyond her, openly staring at himself was May — at least, he supposed it must be May — a robust young woman dressed in a great deal of cheap finery. She was so like Laura that Hugh almost shuddered.

Laura had caught his hand. "Mother — Dad — this is Hughie," she said proudly.

Hugh managed to shake off the numb feeling that had crept over him. He smiled charmingly, and shook hands, a pleasant word on his lips.

Mrs. Burton was flustered and incoherent; her husband, large, solid man, grasped Hugh's hand and bade him welcome quietly. He had shrewd grey eyes that looked straightly at Hugh; alone of the family he did not seem to be awed, or to care what impression he made. He looked to see what manner of man his daughter had married, which was all that mattered to him.

Then Laura led Gladys forward. "This is Gladys, Hugh."

"Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said Gladys, with a little affected laugh of pure nervousness. She tried to think of something else to say, and ended by beckoning to her husband. "My husband. Henry, come and be introduced to Mr. — that is to — to Mr. Salinger," she ended lamely. She could not call him Hugh. She had meant to, but somehow when the moment came, it seemed impossible to claim intimacy with him. It wasn't that he was stuck-up, or starchy. No, nothing could be more pleasant than his manner, she thought — so easy and smiling, and seeming to know just what to do next in the most natural way. He had turned to young May now, awaiting no introduction. He was saying that he was sure she must be Laura's other sister.

"Oh yes, well, we are awfully alike, aren't we?" said May coolly. "People used to remark on it, only of course I'm thinner than Laura."

"Ah, you wait, May!" said Laura, twinkling. "When you're as old as I am now we'll see about that. Mother, if you haven't bought a new rug! I knew there was something different."

"It got so worn out," Mrs. Burton explained, watching Hugh out of the tail of her eye as though fascinated. "Then Father forgot to rake the fire out one night, and next morning what do I find but a hole burnt in the rug as big as a marble. And how it was that we weren't all burned in our beds is a mystery to me." Her gaze, wandering from Hugh, who was talking to George, caught Gladys' expressive eye. She broke off and said politely that she was sure Laura would like to go and take her hat and coat off. "Gladys, you take your sister upstairs," she recommended.

"Well, you are making a stranger of me!" Laura teased her. "Forgotten my way up, do you think?"

"It wouldn't be surprising, the time you've been away, I'm sure," said May rather acidly. "I must say I never expected to see you again. Live and learn, as they say."

Gladys intervened. "No one wants to hear what you expected," she said sharply. "Fat lot you know about anything. Come on, Laura, old girl."

Arm in arm the two elder sisters went out, and up the stairs to Mrs. Burton's bedroom. Laura had too full a heart for speech; and Gladys felt oddly constrained, for this expensively dressed woman seemed very far removed from the Laura who had helped cook the dinner, and put the children to bed. She tried to cover up her constraint by a mock ceremoniousness. "Here we are, Mrs. Salinger! Won't you take your coat off?" she said affectedly.

Laura turned quickly and hugged her. "Oh, Glad!

You don't know what it's like, seeing you again. . ."

Gladys forgot the well-cut clothes and the sable fur. She kissed Laura heartily. "And it's great to have you back, my dear," she said. "My, I have missed you! Oh Laura, you aren't half lucky! You don't mind me saying so, do you? I mean, he's absolutely It, isn't he?"

Laura coloured, and looked anxious. "You do like him, don't you, Glad?"

"Can't say yet, can I? I mean, I've only had two words with him. But I must say he looks a bit of all right, as Henry would say. Well, I always said you ought to do well for yourself, what with your looks, and the advantages you had, and that, but I didn't think you'd go and get anything as posh as what you have done. Is he as nice as he looks?"

"Oh, much, much nicer!" Laura answered. "I can't tell you. You must like him, Glad."

"Of course I shall, silly, if he's good to you."

"So awfully good!"

"My, you are gone on him!" Gladys laughed a little. "I never knew you had it in you. Did you see young May gaping at him? She'll be as jealous as anything, you mark my words. She and her boys, and the side she puts on! She won't swank so much about her rotten Cyril after this. Well, I mean, Mr. Salinger's really most frightfully posh — a gentleman and all that, though I hope I'm not a snob. Though when I think of you being Lady Salinger — well, there!"

"But I'm not." Laura shied away from this. "Has May got engaged? Who's Cyril?"

"Oh, May! Cyril's the latest, but if anything comes of it I for one shall be very surprised. She doesn't think of anything but going to Pictures and the Palais de Danse, May doesn't. And ever since you went away Mother spoils her so. . . Well, she always did, didn't she? Many's the time I've said Mother'll ruin young

May. Selfish little cat, she is! Do you think she'll come and lend me a hand ever? Not she! Why, not all the time Baby was on the way she didn't once offer to. Oh no! She had her work all day, and not one evening or Saturday could Miss May spare for me, thank you."

Laura was straightening her hair before the mirror. As Gladys talked, she seemed to slip back into the old life. Italy became a dream; even her marriage seemed unreal. Just as she had always ignored Gladys' complaints in the old days, and tried to divert her, so she tried now. She asked where the children were, and heard that "the girl" was looking after them in the kitchen. Nothing would do then but that she must go down to see them, and for a long time she had no eyes or interest for anything but Harry, and his little sister. She heard all about Baby's teething troubles, and Harry's mumps, and Gladys' domestic cares, and was only recalled by May's voice shouting somewhat peevishly from the hall: "Glad-ys! Laura! What *are* you doing?"

May came into the kitchen looking a little sulky. "Well, you haven't been a bad time, you two. You'd better go back into the drawing-room. I've got to help the girl dish-up." She sniffed slightly. "I notice you don't offer to help, Gladys. Of course Laura's so grand nowadays she's forgotten what a kitchen looks like."

"Short memory I must have," said Laura good-humouredly. "You don't want more than two people to dish-up, May, or you know very well I'd lend a hand."

"I'm sure I don't want anyone to help," replied May. "Only Gladys never by any chance offers, and I get about fed-up with it. You'd better go and talk to Mother. George and Henry have gone out to look at the car." She spoke this mincingly. It was evident that May was feeling ill-used again.

"Yes, and what a car!" Gladys said, going to the door. "My word, you are lucky, Laura!"

"Oh, my presents! If I hadn't forgotten!" Laura ran out to the front door. "Hughie dear, please bring in the parcels when you come!" She turned to Gladys, at her elbow. "I've brought you some things from Paris I knew you'd like. Perhaps it'll cheer May up. I got a jumper for her which ought to look nice on her. . . . Hullo, Dad!"

He had come out of the drawing-room, and put a hand on her shoulder. Of all his children Laura was his favourite. In her was his own calm, his own good sense. He felt the house to be a different place when Laura was in it, and although he had been incapable, on first seeing her, of saying anything beyond: "Well, Laura!" he was perhaps happier to have her back again than was either Mrs. Burton or Gladys.

He smiled at her now, and pressed her shoulder slightly. "Your mother wants you, Laura." He lingered a moment. "You look happy, my girl," he said.

She kissed him. "I am, Dad. And you — like him?"

"As long as you do, Laura," he said. "Of course he isn't my sort. I know that."

Her face grew troubled. "Or mine, then."

"That's different," he said. "You'd better come in to your mother."

Mrs. Burton had only time to assure Laura in a few rather incoherent sentences that her son-in-law was all and more than could have been desired when Hugh came in, bringing Laura's parcels. These were distributed to everyone's satisfaction, and when the exclamations and the thanks were at an end, a gong was smartly beaten in the hall, and Mrs. Burton said that she was sure Laura and Hugh were ready for their dinner.

They all went into the dining-room at the back of the house. Again Hugh's eyes seemed to himself to be photographic. He had an instant's picture of solid mahogany and red hangings; of a marble clock, and large china ornaments; of a vista, seen through the window, of the

backs of other houses. For a moment he stood as it were outside this nightmarish party, and looked on with cool cynical eyes. Then he heard Mrs. Burton's voice telling him where to sit, and he recovered himself, forced again his rather charming smile, and sat down on Mrs. Burton's right. Mr. Burton, at the other end of the table, began to carve a roast sirloin. "Beef, Laura?" he said.

"Yes please, Dad. How's the world treating you, George?"

Beside Hugh Gladys began a painstaking conversation. May chimed in presently, and Laura, turning from her brother, found Hugh involved in a discussion about the Cinema. Hugh never went to Cinemas; he thought them vulgar; and Bad Art; but obviously he had not made this criticism today. He was listening to May's voluble outburst with just that well-bred air of attention that so discomposed Mrs. Burton.

"You ought to go, Mr. Salinger, really you ought," May said. "I've been twice, and it's very few films you want to see twice, is it? Not when you come to think of it. Of course I'd go to see Rudolph Valentino sixty times, but that's different, isn't it? But you ought to go to this. The girl in it — I don't know how she does it, and it quite takes your breath away to see her — well, she climbs out of a window ten stories high. I know it was ten, because I counted them, though George says it was only seven."

"Who's taking my name in vain?" asked George brightly.

"It sounds very nerve-racking whether it was seven or ten," contributed Hugh, covertly watching Gladys manipulating her knife with two fingers twined about it. "It would be rather interesting to go behind the scenes and see how these things are done."

"Oh, I can see you're one of the people who say they

fake things," said May. "Now, I know for a fact, because I saw it in the papers — "

"You and your papers!" said George scornfully. "You'd believe anything you saw in the papers, you would."

"George, you pass your sister's plate up for some more vegetables," commanded his mother. "Mr. Salinger, let me help you to another potato?"

"No more, thank you," Hugh said.

Mrs. Burton forgot her nervousness in solicitude. "Why, you've no appetite, Mr. Salinger. Laura, you ought to see your husband eats properly."

"Hughie never does eat much," Laura replied. "It used to worry me, but I've sort of got used to it." She smiled across at Hugh. In her smile was gratitude to him for being "nice." She began to talk about Italy, to rescue Hugh from Cinema discussions, and soon the entire family forgot its constraint, and chimed in with questions and incredulous exclamations.

"Mimosa growing in your garden!" marvelled Mrs. Burton. "Well, that makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Of course mimosa grows like that in Italy," said Gladys, in the artificial voice she reserved for Hugh. "After all, it has to grow somewhere." She turned to Laura. "I wonder you didn't get sick of all that foreign food; I know I should have."

"You bet she's quite the expert macaroni-eater," said George, and began a humorous pantomime.

Hugh perceived that George was the wit of the family.

May now got up to clear away the plates. Of instinct Hugh rose to do it for her, and constraint again descended on the family.

"You sit down, Mr. Salinger," Mrs. Burton begged. "May always helps the girl. She's a good girl, as they go, but come into the room she will not, not when there are visitors."

"One wonders what servants are coming to, really one does," said Gladys, making a pile of dirty plates to hand to May. "But of course if you say a word to them it's up and off out of the house they are before you know where you are. You will excuse the informality, Mr. Salinger."

"I wish you would let me help," Hugh said politely.

"Well, that's being quite one of the family, I'm sure," said Gladys.

Something inside Hugh shivered.

May brought in an apple tart, and a pallid corn-flour mould which Mrs. Burton referred to as "blemonge." Mr. Burton began to talk to the silent Henry about his work. Laura told her mother that when her other trunks arrived the family must see the pictures Hugh had painted of their house at Siena. Gladys remarked that it was very interesting to know an artist, and George said that he didn't know how anyone could do it. Presently, when no one could eat any more, and conversation was becoming more and more laboured, he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I propose that we adjourn this meeting." So they all trooped back to the drawing-room, and Gladys fetched her children from the kitchen. Hugh stole a glance at his wrist-watch, and looked expressively at Laura.

Laura had expected to stay to tea; it was certain that the Burtons expected this too. But she hardly less than Hugh had suffered during the visit, not for herself, but for him. No matter how dear, how kind the Burtons were it had been folly to think that Hugh could possibly fit in. He had behaved well, but he was so different that Laura, feeling herself at home with her family, had seen the gulf widen between herself and him. She knew Hugh well enough to realize how he must hate this homely party. At this very moment he must be chafed and uncomfortable, for Mrs. Burton, mellowed and more at ease, was talking to him confidentially about the ad-

vantages Laura had had in working with ladies during the War, and then going into that high-class hat-shop and all. Suddenly Laura felt that she wanted to go even more than Hugh did. Hugh was despising her family: she could not bear it. Abruptly she asked him the time.

"Why, you aren't thinking of going, surely?" said Mrs. Burton, distressed.

"I — I think we'll have to, Mother," Laura answered, flushing and stammering.

Hugh came gracefully to the rescue. "You see, I've promised to take Laura to call on some friends of mine," he said.

"Well, this is a short visit," said Mrs. Burton unhappily. "And I quite thought you'd be stopping to tea, and perhaps even supper. I'm sure we all wanted you to, and hoped you would."

May, who was sucking a string of beads she wore about her neck, removed them from her mouth to say: "I told you so. Of course I was laughed at and told I didn't know anything, but he who laughs last laughs longest, that's all."

"And I made one of my plum cakes that you used to be so fond of, Laura," said Mrs. Burton, unheeding. "Not that I want to persuade you, if you have to go somewhere else, because an engagement's an engagement, say what you will."

Tears welled into Laura's eyes; she hid them. "I'm so sorry. I wish we could stay." She looked pleadingly at Hugh. At one moment it had seemed impossible to stay; now it was impossible to go, because her family would be so hurt.

But Hugh ignored the pleading look. "It's awfully kind of you, Mrs. Burton," he said easily, "but I think we mustn't stop. I particularly want Laura to meet these people and Sunday happens to be their only free day."

Mr. Burton unexpectedly supported him. "Of course we quite understand. You mustn't over-persuade them, Mother. Gladys, you take your sister to put on her coat and hat."

Laura rose; she felt she could not meet her mother's eyes, nor her sister's. She forced herself to speak lightly. "Now I'm home again, Mother, you'll see so much of me you'll soon give up asking me to stop longer. It's — it's these first days that seem such a rush with so many people to see, and — and that."

"Oh, *we* understand!" said May significantly.

Laura went out with Gladys to fetch her hat and coat. Neither sister said anything for a minute or two, then as Laura buttoned her coat Gladys said: "When you aren't too busy, Laura, come down to see me. I won't ask Mr. Salinger, as I'm sure he's got a lot to do. But I wish you'd come — that is, if you want to."

Laura flung her arms about Gladys. "You know I'll come!"

Gladys kissed her rather awkwardly. "And you know I want you to, old girl. Still, if you think you'd better — if you find you can't, well I shall quite understand, that's all. Because we can see plain enough Mr. Salinger's not our sort, and I'm sure we couldn't blame you if you didn't come."

"It's nothing to do with that — don't talk that way, Gladys! You wouldn't think that of me! That I'd turn up my nose at my own people because I'd — I'd married out of my station," Laura cried urgently.

Gladys gave her shoulder a pat. "Don't you get worked up, old dear. I only thought I'd tell you that you won't find us intruding unless you want us."

They kissed in silence. Laura could say nothing. Gladys expected her to say nothing. They went downstairs together to where Hugh was waiting to take Laura away.

CHAPTER XIII

HUGH made arrangements to go down to Alleyne almost at once. Because he shrank from taking Laura there he had thought to postpone the visit for as long as possible, but since he had seen her family his one thought was to sweep her out of their reach.

He was wretchedly unhappy, and in his unhappiness resentment played no small part. He had spoken hardly at all of that grim Sunday at Brixton, for what could he say? Throughout the time he had spent at Laburnum Avenue a reiterated thought had thrummed in his brain: "This is my mother-in-law . . . my *mother-in-law* . . . These are my sisters-in-law, this is my brother-in-law." He felt almost sick with rage: rage at himself, rage at Laura, rage at the Burtons. It was all very well to despise snobbery, all very well to talk of kind hearts being more than coronets, but the fool who wrote that, he thought savagely, could never have visualized so impossible a situation as his. He tried to imagine a meeting between his mother and Mrs. Burton, and succeeded so well that sheer impotent horror overcame him. If it was snobbish to feel such horror he was and must be a snob. But surely apart from snobbery he had a right to expect his mother-in-law to speak the King's English. Rage boiled up again, more bitter for the furtive knowledge that having married Laura he had no right to expect anything of her family.

She had thanked him pathetically for being nice to the Burtons. She meant, he supposed, decently polite. Had she expected him to be rude, he wondered? Did she give him credit for so little breeding? With a

groan he realized that she was so far from understanding the laws that governed his order that she had feared he might be what she would have called "stuck-up" and "grand."

He thought despairingly that the whole situation was hopeless, and the sick rage at himself turned to a resentment against her that she had not of her own volition cut herself off from her family. Not a doubt but that if he demanded this of her she would do it, but how could he make such a demand? How mean he must appear if he required that of her! She should have done it with no word from him; she should have seen that it must be done. The egotist in Hugh was uppermost; if some understanding of Laura's own cruel position peeped in his brain he was quick to smother it. She had chosen him; then she must give up her family. But that had not been a part of the bargain. He, he alone had insisted on their marriage, and now it was not for him to bid her throw over her mother and her father. In a fit of aggrieved self-pity he thought that if she really loved him she would do this. Such a thought could not long endure; he could not doubt the depths of her love for him; he could only look aghast upon himself that he should be led into such hypocrisies. Marriage with her was doing that to him, turning him from — he supposed — a decent fellow into a man who could think disloyalties of his wife, to exonerate his own folly; who could wish her to do the shabby thing from which he himself shrank.

A heavy sigh tore itself from him; his head ached with the dreary effort to see a way out of his difficulties; his heart ached too, for her to whom his love stretched out, desperately striving to shut out all else but love itself.

She seemed so far above her family after this visit to them that he jumped to a conclusion that it was the family only that mattered. And since he could not lower himself enough to tell her to put them out of her life

he seized on a half-measure, a temporary separation. He wrote incontinent to Alleyne, saying that he and Laura would come down that week.

She acquiesced in this; she had felt all along that he ought to go, but she was shaken by nervous fears. Knowing that Hugh did not like to hear her speak of them she kept a close guard on her tongue. She began to feel very lonely and without support; he found her crying in her room, and took her in his arms, passionately, fiercely kissing her.

"What is it, my darling ? Tell me !"

She gulped down the tears, she tried to smile. "It's silly — I didn't mean you to know. But I'm so afraid, Hughie, I'm so afraid I'll do something wrong and your people will despise me."

Love for her swept everything else out. "Just be your own dear self," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I shall be there."

She took his face between her hands; her eyes were glowing. "Oh Hughie, when you're beside me, loving me, I couldn't be afraid of anything. If only you don't stop loving me !"

"You know I couldn't do that," he said.

They motored down to Alleyne the next day. Only when Hugh began to point out his old landmarks did the choking feeling of fright come back to Laura, and then she hid it in admiration of the countryside.

Hugh changed into low gear for the run down a steep hill in the village. "Nearly there now," he said. "The road turns sharp right at the foot of the hill, and you see the village. Alleyne lies three miles to the west of it."

A high wall, mellow with age, loomed ahead where the road swung to the right. Laura, desperately talking to hide her nervousness said: "Oh look ! Flowers growing between the bricks. Isn't it sweet ?"

"Quite picturesque," said Hugh, "but I should prefer it if they widened the road. I nearly crashed into it once

as a kid, riding a bike down here." He negotiated the corner, and changed up. "The village, darling. On our right we have the famous shop where Hugh Salinger used to buy lollipops. On our left the Black Boar. Ahead of us, the lane leading to the Court."

They sped up this lane, and came all too soon to wrought-iron gates that stood wide on to the road. Hugh swung in at these gates, and they passed now up an avenue that seemed to Laura miles long. The avenue sloped upwards, and presently, round a bend, the house came into view, not the white edifice of Laura's imaginings, but an old place of Tudor brick, with oriel windows, and high chimney stacks, and a terrace with clipped yews in pots. The house had been added to from time to time, so that now there was little of the original E shape to be seen. A wing sprawled outwards to the west so that the terrace was shut in on two sides. The avenue swung round the corner of a smooth lawn to where some shallow steps led down to it from the terrace.

Hugh switched off the engine. "Like it, Laura ?"

She felt a little dazed. "It's lovely !" she said. She sought for words. "The garden — why, it's a regular park !"

"Oh no, not quite," Hugh said, smiling. He got out, and held the door for her. "Come along, darling."

Her fright seemed to envelop her again. Dumbly she followed Hugh up the steps and across the terrace to the porch. She became aware of a forbidding figure in black.

"Hullo, Penny !" Hugh said. "Laura, this is Penny, who used to fish me out of the pond when I was a kid."

The forbidding person must be a butler. But what did one say to butlers when one was introduced like that ? She had never expected Hugh to speak to a butler as though he were a personal friend. She smiled doubtfully

and said thank you to Penny's welcome to her. Her beautiful, scared eyes looked round for footmen in knee-breeches. She could see none, but somehow it did not seem less awe-inspiring for their absence.

She stepped into the hall, and her sense of bewilderment grew. It was not what she had expected. She was ready for a display of opulence; she had imagined such a mansion as she had often seen in cinema-dramas; this low-pitched room with the old oak beams irregularly supporting the ceiling, was like none of her imaginings. Her first impression was that everything looked a little faded, and very old. There was a carpet of soft blues and softer reds, a gate-leg table, warped with age; a grandfather clock; some chairs whose wooden arms were worn; very few pictures; quite inexpensive chintz curtains, and scarcely any ornaments upon the high mantelshelf. The fireplace was stone, and of a preposterous size, with actually two little wooden seats set on either side just under the chimney. Laura thought: "Fancy sitting practically inside the fire! And I'm sure it must smoke — a thing that size."

She had no time to look at anything else. A footstep sounded on the stairs. A light, plaintive voice called: "Hugo dear!" She turned quickly, and saw Mrs. Salinger.

Mrs. Salinger came down the wide stairway with her hands held out to Hugh. "Dear boy!" She gave him her delicately tinted cheek to kiss; her little hands fluttered over him, but her eyes, blue as his, and as hard, went past him to where Laura stood. "And so this is dear Laura?" she said, gently disengaging herself from Hugh's embrace.

Laura felt suddenly large and awkward beside Mrs. Salinger. Her hands seemed to be in the way, and her clothes ceased to fit her. She bent to kiss Mrs. Salinger, who clearly expected this. The powdered cheek smelled

of roses. What a little, frail woman Hugh's mother was, and how young she looked! "Yes, I'm — Laura," she said in a low, trembling voice.

"I have been so anxious to meet my daughter-in-law," Mrs. Salinger said cooingly.

"It's — it's very kind of you. I — I wanted to meet you too," Laura answered.

A door opened at the far end of the hall, and two people came out, an elderly lady in stout tweeds, contrasting oddly with Mrs. Salinger's daintiness, and a girl with an Eton crop and scarlet lips.

"Hullo, Joyce!" said Hugh. "How do you do, Aunt Lilian? Laura — this is Joyce, and this is my aunt."

Laura thought she saw hostility in both faces, imperfectly hidden beneath welcoming smiles. She held out her hand, and stammered: "Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

Mrs. Salinger and her daughter exchanged glances: Hugh's heart sank. He had so carefully instructed her to say: "How do you do?" and in the first moment of fright she must needs forget.

"You will be dusty after the drive down," stated Lady Powis. "I am sure you would like to go to your room before we have tea."

"Yes please — that is — " Laura looked imploringly at Hugh, who nodded and smiled. "I should like to — to tidy myself."

"Then Joyce will show you the way up," said Lady Powis. She smiled in a tight, thin-lipped way that chilled Laura. "I know she will like to get to know you as soon as possible."

Laura cast a doubtful, nervous glance towards her sister-in-law. "Thank you."

"Oh, but I am going to take Laura up," announced Mrs. Salinger, prettily smiling. "Come with me, Laura. Lilian has put you in the walnut room, Hugo dear."

Hugh slightly pressed Laura's hand. "Righto, mater.

Go with the mater, darling: she'll look after you."

The walnut room seemed very large to Laura, quaking beside her mother-in-law. A housemaid seemed to be waiting for them there. Laura wondered why.

"I hope you'll be comfortable, Laura," said Mrs. Salinger. "Your bathroom is through that door, and Hugh's dressing-room is beyond it. Now would you like to take your hat and coat off?"

"Yes, please," Laura said. Her voice seemed to die in her throat. She took off her hat, and fumbled in her handbag for the key to the dressing-case Hugh had given her. A brush was found, and a comb. She straightened her glorious hair, and in the mirror saw Mrs. Salinger's critical eyes upon her.

"And are you glad to be back in England?" Mrs. Salinger asked.

"I — I was sorry to leave Siena," Laura answered. "I mean — it was so lovely there. But it is nice to be home again, near one's people, and that."

"I'm sure your mother must have missed you," nodded Mrs. Salinger. "I hope to make her acquaintance some day soon."

"She'll be — very pleased."

"And are you the only daughter?" Mrs. Salinger's voice was smooth and caressing, but instinctively Laura knew that she did not feel caressing really. "It seems so strange that I should have to ask you, but really I know so little about you, my dear."

Laura could find nothing to say.

"Of course I quite understood," Mrs. Salinger went on, "but one couldn't help feeling sorry that your wedding took place abroad."

Laura met her eyes. "I know. I felt like that — that you ought to know." She became aware of the housemaid, and broke off. "I'm — I think I'm ready now, Mrs. Salinger."

"Then shall we come down? My brother-in-law is

most anxious to see you, but I said that I must be the first. And I always feel it is most discomposing to meet so many strangers all at once."

"It is, isn't it?" agreed Laura, feeling grateful for this kindly thought.

The maid spoke. "May I have your keys, please madam?"

"My keys?" said Laura, startled.

"Mary will unpack for you, dear child. Or would you prefer to do it for yourself?"

Laura thought: "Why didn't Hughie warn me? Now that girl knows I'm not used to a big house and grand ways." She stiffened her courage. "Oh, I always unpack for myself, thank you, Mrs. Salinger."

"Just as you like, my dear. Then let us come down. You must be dying for some tea. Such a long run, and so dusty. I suppose Hugh has bought a car?" Mrs. Salinger became rather more plaintive. "Dear boy! So dreadfully extravagant."

"I'm afraid it was," said Laura, following her downstairs. "I didn't want him to, but he seemed so set on it somehow."

Mrs. Salinger crossed the hall and opened one of the doors that led out of it. "So naughty of him . . . Well, here we are, Charles. This is Laura."

The room seemed to be full of people. Laura saw Hugh standing beside a tall, very upright man with grey hair and eyes that were rather bored, rather weary, and yet rather amused.

Mrs. Salinger led her forward; the tall man came to meet them, and held out his hand. "Ah, how do you do, my dear? But how charming!"

Laura was slightly shocked, but she felt that if this was the way a nobleman greeted a complete stranger it could not be wrong. Besides, he was quite old, so probably that was an excuse. She said "How do you do?" and shook hands with him.

Hugh was gay and smiling: he had rather dreaded this meeting with his uncle, but it had passed off wonderfully well. Laura was looking very lovely too, and that should get her into Salinger's good graces.

"I told you that she was charming, uncle," he said laughingly.

Laura blushed. "Oh Hughie, how can you — ?" She stole a glance up into the thin face above her. "Hughie does say such things, Lord Salinger," she apologized.

"I feel sure he does," said Salinger gravely. "But do call me Uncle, won't you ? I am an uncle, you know." His eyes travelled slowly to Mrs. Salinger's face, and on to Joyce, standing sulkily apart, and the amusement in them grew.

"It is very kind of you. If you want me to of course I will," said Laura, feeling that here, in the most unexpected quarter, she had found a friend.

Lady Powis, seated behind the tea-table intervened in a severe voice of disapproval. "My daughter Hylda, Laura, and Miss Hepplewhite."

Laura shook hands, with both these ladies. Hylda was a plain young woman with lank, straggling hair, and a nose slightly pink at the tip. She shook hands in a vigorous, masculine fashion, and said briskly that she had very much wanted to meet her new cousin. Stella Hepplewhite was fair and slender. Laura had an impression of grave blue eyes, and very fair hair, and a cool, quiet voice.

Lady Powis, who appeared to be a born manager, indicated a chair with so firm a movement of her hand that Laura felt she would not dare to sit in any other chair. "Will you sit there, Laura ? Do you take cream and sugar ?"

It seemed to Laura that the room was full of eyes, all critically turned towards her. She set her teeth. "No cream, thank you," she said.

"Perhaps you like lemon ?" said Lady Powis.

"Just milk, thank you."

Lady Powis handed a cup and saucer to Hugh. "Take that to your wife, Hugh. Hylda, Aunt Emmeline has nothing to eat."

Mrs. Salinger sat down in a chair near Laura. "I never eat at tea-time, Lilian," she said reproachfully.

"I had forgotten that fad of yours," said Lady Powis untruthfully. "Personally I am no believer in these new-fangled diets." She turned politely to Laura. "I am sorry my son is not at home to meet you, Laura."

"Possibly Laura feels that one less to meet is more of a blessing than a disappointment," remarked Salinger.

Laura did not know what to say in answer to this, so she smiled, and remained silent.

"Where is Jim ?" asked Hugh.

"James has gone on a reading tour with a friend," replied Lady Powis with satisfaction.

"And that is really true," said Salinger pensively.

Hugh laughed. Lady Powis said: "Certainly it is true, Charles. James has never deceived me in his life, I am thankful to say." Her glance travelled to Mrs. Salinger's face, and rested there for a significant moment.

Mrs. Salinger flushed delicately; the inference was sufficiently obvious. "Let us hope you will always be able to say that, dearest Lilian," she said sweetly. She turned to Laura. "And what are your plans, Laura ? Or have you and Hugh made none yet ?"

"I don't really know," Laura answered. She looked across the room to where Hugh was talking to his sister, and to Stella Hepplewhite. "Hughie hasn't said yet. I expect we shall look for a house, or a little flat. We wouldn't like to stay in hotels — not for long, that is."

"Well, I hope you will stay here for as long as you please," said Salinger.

"Thank you. It's very kind of you, I'm sure," Laura

answered, inwardly praying that Hugh would not require that of her.

"Dear Charles! Such a houseful for you!" smiled Mrs. Salinger, raising her eyes to his face. "Aren't we a tiresome family?"

Laura had a sudden qualm. "I hope it wasn't inconvenient, Lord — Uncle Charles, I mean — us coming down like this? Because I'm sure, if it is, we'd — "

"My dear Laura, it is a great pleasure for us to have you," he assured her, in that disconcertingly amused voice of his.

"My brother is accustomed to having his house full," explained Lady Powis.

Mrs. Salinger eyed her for a moment, as though meditating whether she would take up the gage or not. She knew perfectly well that this last shaft had been levelled at her. Poor Lilian had always been deplorably jealous of her influence over Salinger, and of Salinger's affection for Hugh.

While she meditated Hylda moved over to a seat beside Laura, and looked earnestly at her. "Do tell me," she began, "how did you find conditions in Italy?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Laura.

"Labour conditions," said Hylda, rather impatiently. "I am very much interested in the subject, as I suppose all serious people must be."

Hugh heard this, and looked round. "Still hot on Socialism, Hylda?"

"My dear Hugh, surely you know me well enough to realize that I'm not likely to change my views?"

Suddenly Laura perceived that Hylda was very like her mother.

"Sorry," said Hugh unabashed. "Yet I certainly had an idea that Femininism was your latest craze."

"If you can call so vital a question a craze," said Hylda crushingly. "Socialism and Femininism are not incom-

patible." She turned again to Laura. "I am a member of a most important Group," she announced. "I should so like to introduce you. I feel sure you would be interested in our aims, and we are always anxious to welcome married women. So many of them seem to feel that marriage must occupy their whole time and interest."

"Don't try and convert Laura," said Hugh, strolling towards them. "I'll have no such clap-trap in my house."

"Hughie dear . . . !" murmured Laura, distressed at this rudeness.

Hylda fixed her rather hungry eyes on his face. "That has been Man's attitude through the centuries. Because he was afraid to allow Woman a say. Afraid for his superiority, for his supremacy. But Woman has forced her way up; she has demanded Equal Rights; she has — "

"Ah yes, my dear," interposed Salinger languidly. "Quite so. But you must not lecture us. We will all admit your charming sex to be incomparable."

"It is men like you, Uncle Charles, who are our worst enemies," Hylda said earnestly. "You treat us as playthings, and think we can be satisfied with flattery."

"Do not argue with your uncle, Hylda," said Lady Powis. "I do not care for such subjects at all. Some more tea, Emmeline ?"

Mrs. Salinger gave her cup to Hugh. "Thank you, Lilian." She looked around with her childlike, appealing smile. "I am afraid I am always quite satisfied with flattery," she said. "But I'm afraid you would say I am very frivolous, dear Hylda."

Hylda, who thoroughly despised her aunt, declined to take any notice of this. She renewed her attack on Laura. "Don't let Hugh override you," she said ur-

gently. "It is every woman's duty to her sex to interest herself in this enormous question."

"You will make a dreadfully bad wife, dearest, at this rate," said Mrs. Salinger.

"Strange as it may seem, Aunt Emmy, marriage is not my highest ambition," retorted Hylda. "When you are in town, Laura, I hope you will come to one of our meetings, and judge for yourself."

"It's very kind of you," said Laura, "but I don't think I should be any use. That is, I don't know about these things. And if Hughie doesn't want me to, I'm sure I wouldn't want to."

Salinger gently clapped his hands. "But this is excellent!" he said. "Hugh, I felicitate you."

"Woman's place," declared Lady Powis, "has always been, and still is, I maintain, in the Home."

"Oh Mother, that sort of talk is hopelessly out-of-date!" said Hylda impatiently, and stalked away to the window.

Salinger took the vacated seat. He set Laura's cup and saucer down for her, and was rewarded by a shy, awed smile. The thought in her mind was: "Fancy me being waited on by a lord!"

"You must tell me about your house in Siena," he said. "I had so glowing an account from Hugh that I feel you must be very sad to leave it."

"Oh, it was so beautiful," Laura said impulsively. "You wouldn't believe! And the flowers, and the sun, and the little fountain!" Her eyes were bright with sudden tears. "I couldn't seem to get over having mimosa actually growing in the garden."

"It must have seemed like a dream." Stella's cool voice spoke.

Laura looked quickly round at her. The blue eyes were grave, but friendly. "Yes," Laura said. "It did seem like that." There was a little pause while she thrust

Memory aside. "But I expect you've been to Italy lots of times, and know all about it. I hadn't ever been anywhere, except in France during the War, so — so it seemed just like fairyland to me."

"No, I haven't been to Italy," said Stella. "I'm always hoping to get there, but somehow the moment never comes." She rose. "I think it's time I was getting home," she said, and went to shake hands with Lady Powis.

Joyce came out of her corner. "I'll take you up to get your hat," she said. Her face was sulky still, resentful. She had spoken hardly at all throughout tea.

Stella shook hands with Laura. "Good-bye. I hope we shall meet often while you are down here. I live only a mile away, you know."

"Thanks," Laura said. "I'd like to. You're very kind."

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Laura went upstairs to unpack Hugh lingered only a few minutes. The atmosphere was heavy with unspoken condemnation; Lady Powis had folded her lips as one who would say "I told you so"; Mrs. Salinger looked tearful; Joyce was frankly sullen. It was easy to read these faces, but not easy to know what Salinger thought. Hugh stole a glance at him, and found the cynical eyes resting on his face. He felt the colour steal into his cheeks. He became uneasy, and presently got up with a lame excuse, that he would go and "see about his things." As he shut the door behind him he could imagine how the condemnation would break out, how his mother would shed a few easy tears, how Joyce would rage. Only he did not know what Salinger would say, and this uncertainty affected him more nearly than anything else. He felt that he stood apart from his family; felt too, in bitterness, that the easy comradeship he had enjoyed with Salinger was now at an end.

His footsteps had died away on the stairs before anyone of those left in the drawing-room spoke. Mrs. Salinger broke the tense silence by bursting into soft tears. "I knew it !" she wept. "Oh Charles, what have I done to deserve this ?"

Lady Powis could tell her that, and did so. "You always spoiled him, Emmeline," she said. "I for one am not surprised at the result. He was never taught to consider anything but his pleasure, and now you see what happens."

"A barmaid !" Mrs. Salinger put her handkerchief to her eyes. "How can I ever face anyone again ?"

Salinger was lighting a cigar, and did not look up. "Oh no, my dear," he said. "By no means a barmaid. She would be shocked to hear you say so."

Mrs. Salinger turned to him with pretty impulsiveness. "What am I to do ? Charles, what can I do ?"

"I suppose you can make the best of it," said Salinger.

Mrs. Salinger collapsed. "Ah, you don't understand ! No one can understand how his mother feels."

Joyce burst in on this. Her face was pale with anger. "It's damnable !" she said in a shaking voice. "Damnable, *damnable !*"

"I don't see why." Hylda thrust out her chin a little. "I'm delighted to find that Hugh has thrown aside the barriers of class. I never thought he had it in him."

"You are talking of what you know nothing, Hylda," said her mother. "I think if you and Joyce were to run away now — "

"I'm going." Joyce strode to the door. With her fingers clutching the handle she looked back defiantly. "You can say what you like, and make the best of it as Uncle Charles suggests, but I'll never, never give in ! As for Hylda, with her asinine talk of equality — it isn't her brother who's made a mess of his life !" She ended on a sob, and almost flung herself out of the room.

Lady Powis signed to Hylda to go away. With a short laugh Hylda obeyed. Lady Powis looked up at her brother in some exasperation. "Well, Charles ? So far you have said very little to the point. I suppose you won't try to make me believe you are pleased. What do you think ?"

"What do I think ? Quite a number of things, Lilian. I don't propose to weary you with them."

Mrs. Salinger dabbed ineffectively at her eyes. "She's impossible ! An adventuress ! A common, intriguing maid-servant !"

"Oh no, Emmy, it is not so easy as that. She is neither an adventuress nor an intriguer. I should be almost

hopeful if she were. She is a very respectable young woman."

Mrs. Salinger moaned faintly. "It sounds terrible!"

"I expect it does," agreed Salinger.

"Really, Charles, I cannot understand you," said Lady Powis impatiently. "One would think from the way you speak that you liked the creature."

"I do like her. Impersonally she interests me considerably."

"Impersonally! What is the use of that?"

"My dear Lilian, I shall certainly not regard her in any other light. She is not — thank God! — my wife."

Lady Powis struck at the joint in this annoying armour. "She's the wife of your heir, Charles. Have you thought of that, I wonder?"

"It has occurred to me," he admitted blandly.

"How Hugh could have done it — !" wailed Mrs. Salinger. "What did he *see* in her?"

"She is very beautiful — yes, perhaps one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen," said Salinger. "Moreover, she obviously worships Hugh. It isn't so difficult to understand."

"But to marry her!"

"A mistake, I agree."

"I wonder you don't throw him off!" Mrs. Salinger said tragically. "He has made us all ridiculous."

"Quite so, Emmy, and I certainly do not intend to add the finishing touch to the farce. Let us strive to preserve our dignity."

"Charles, if you imagine that I can ever bring myself to treat her as a daughter — "

"I imagine nothing so improbable, Emmy. It is conceivable that you and Lilian might exert yourselves to — er — apply a veneer of polish. You might, were you very patient and tactful, eradicate the outward blemishes. Don't be alarmed: I am quite sure you won't do anything of the sort. In fact, I feel reasonably certain that you

will proclaim to the world your very understandable disgust at the situation."

"I can't pretend that I am pleased, Charles."

"No, my dear, I am sure you cannot."

"I suppose you mean something disagreeable, Charles," said Lady Powis, with asperity. "For my part I thank heaven it is not my affair."

"Lilian, you never disappoint me," Salinger said.

"But," continued Lady Powis, "I cannot but hope that they will not remain in this house long. I trust I know how to be civil even under such trying circumstances as this, but Laura's presence here is intolerable. Oh, you needn't be afraid that I shall add to the scandal by refusing to entertain them, Charles. I may be a fool, but I have some regard for my dignity. But when I think that at this very moment Mrs. Hugh Salinger is probably being discussed in the servants' hall — well, there is no need for me to say more. If you were to ask me I should say that her place was in the servants' hall, but no matter. You can rely upon me to make the best of an abominable affair. And if you have any sense at all, Emmeline, you will behave as though there were nothing irregular in this marriage. The only thing for us to do is to ignore Laura's — commonness. But, I repeat, I shall be heartily thankful when Hugh takes her away."

"I don't think you need worry," said Salinger. "I shall be surprised if Laura wishes to stay."

Herein he was more right than he knew, but he did not know that a rigorous sense of duty governed Laura.

Upstairs, mechanically unpacking her trunk, Laura was thinking hard. Her impulse was to beg Hugh to take her away. She checked it sternly: such cowardice would defeat the very end she had in view. She knew she must study these alarming people, watch their every movement, listen to the way they spoke, copy them, mould herself slowly, painfully on their lines. This was

clearly her duty, but how hard it would be only she knew. As far as she could see they had no manners at all.

This was a shock to Laura. A certain easiness of demeanour there might be, but in each member of the family Laura had seen a lack of manners. She labelled them "free and easy"; and could not but disapprove. Mrs. Salinger and Lady Powis aimed barbs at each other as no lady should; Mrs. Salinger lit a cigarette before other people had finished tea without so much as asking if anyone minded. Lady Powis, for all her grand air, was downright rude to everyone, and as for Joyce her lowering brow and sullen behaviour would never have been tolerated in the Burton household. Hylda, talking so loudly and interrupting her elders, was no better. Salinger himself Laura regarded dubiously. He was not her idea of what a lord should be. Had he been an ordinary man, with no title, she would have described him as "a bit familiar." The only member of the party who had conducted herself in a ladylike way was Stella Hepplewhite.

Laura told herself that she did not know what to make of Stella. She and Salinger alone did not show in their faces what they felt. On a wave of gratitude Laura reflected that Stella had "made no difference" in the way she spoke to her. She ought to like Stella, yet somehow she did not like her. She had had to be so watchful throughout tea that very little had escaped her. Even while Mrs. Salinger had been talking to her she had continued covertly to watch the others, and she could not fail to see the signs of deep friendship that passed between Hugh and Stella. Something in Stella's eyes when she looked at Hugh had put Laura on her guard, alert, suspicious. She was ashamed of this stab of jealousy, but she could not forget it. Stella was all that she herself could never be, and when she talked to Hugh it was with the ease of long familiarity.

Laura brushed all this aside, impatient with herself. She thought: "I've got enough troubles already, without going out to look for new ones."

A knock fell on the door, and Hylda came in, to see, she said, if she couldn't help Laura to unpack. Finding that Laura had finished unpacking she sat down by the window and said that she wanted to have a talk with her.

Laura wished that she could like Hylda better. "It's very nice of you, but I'm sure you'd rather be playing tennis, wouldn't you? Or — or with Miss Salinger."

"You must call her Joyce," said Hylda. "No, she's in one of her bad moods. And in any case we have nothing in common."

"Oh!" said Laura. She looked timidly at Hylda. "Do you think I ought to say Joyce? I mean, she might not like it."

"Of course you must. I hope you will call me Hylda. You mustn't think that I am a believer in these foolish class prejudices."

Something in Laura suddenly revolted. A gleam came into her eye. "Thanks!" she said in a voice she might have used in speaking to May.

Hylda was impervious to danger signals. "Of course you can see for yourself how absurdly narrow and hidebound the others are. But you and I will be friends, I hope."

"Then you can prove to people that you don't believe in — class distinctions," said Laura.

Hylda looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I'd rather you didn't throw my class up in my face," Laura answered.

There was an awful silence. Laura broke it, speaking now in a subdued, rather frightened voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't — I ought not to have said that. I hope you'll forget it."

"But you are quite wrong," Hylda said earnestly. "I

wasn't throwing up what you call your class in your face. For me classes simply don't exist. Man is born equal — "

"I don't see how you make that out," said Laura. "You woudn't go hob-nobbing with the butler, would you ? And if it comes to that I might as well have been born here instead of at Brixton."

"Exactly !" said Hylda triumphantly. "It is just Circumstance, and nothing else. We are all the same underneath, and I consider Penny in exactly the same light as I consider — oh, Uncle Charles !"

Laura was now deeply shocked. "Well, I never in all my life — ! The butler the same as your uncle ? I never did !"

"But naturally he is, apart from Circumstance."

"Miss — that is, Hylda — you can't get me to listen to that sort of talk. Why, it's downright Bolshevism ! I know it isn't for me to say anything, but you oughtn't to talk that way, really you oughtn't. Whatever next ! You might as well say that I'm no better than a barmaid."

"I do say so. We are all of us equal."

Laura set her hands on her hips, magnificent in wrath. "See here, Miss Pow — Hylda, I mean, if you think that's the sort of class I come from you're wrong. I may have served in a shop and I'd have you know my people didn't half like that — but — "

"You don't understand !" interrupted Hylda. "I don't consider *I* am any better than a barmaid."

Laura stared at her for a moment, then laughed. "Why, you simply don't know what you're talking about !" she said. "It isn't sense, Hylda."

Hylda was nettled. "Possibly I know rather more about it than you do. Moreover I hardly expected to find you were a believer in class distinction."

Laura, having decided that Hylda was slightly unbalanced, no longer felt angry. "Thought I was one

of these Communists we hear so much about nowadays, didn't you ? I know I'm not Hughie's equal, none better, but I was brought up decently, and my people were always very particular."

"I see it's no good arguing," said Hylda.

"Not a bit," said Laura cheerfully. "I may not know much, but I do know better than to think the butler's the same as Lord Salinger. What an idea !" She laughed again, that deep, musical laugh that had charmed Hugh but which did not charm Hylda. Then she remembered that this rather silly girl was Hugh's cousin, and repented. "You'll be thinking I wasn't ever taught good manners," she said. "I'm sure I didn't mean to be rude, but just for a bit you reminded me of my young sister when she gets hold of some of her notions."

Hylda got up. She did not in the least like being compared to Laura's sister, although she would have died rather than own it. "I think it's time I went to dress," she said.

The laugh died out of Laura's eyes. "I'm afraid I've offended you," she said, thinking miserably that here was a wretched beginning.

"Oh no, not at all ! Why should I be offended ? I am only disappointed to find you as hidebound as all the rest. Still, I shall hope to convert you." She went out, and Laura, staring dismally at the shut door, wondered whether she had made an enemy.

She was still wondering when Hugh came in. She turned a woe-begone face towards him. "Oh Hughie, I've gone and quarrelled with your cousin !" she said.

He burst out laughing. "Cheers ! What's she been doing ?"

Laura told him anxiously, dreading his anger. But he was not at all angry. He said: "Good for you ! Hylda's rabid on the subject. Picked it up at college, I suppose. How I do loathe college girls ! Earnest

young women who quote Shelley. Don't worry about her, darling. I'm very glad you sat on her."

"But I oughtn't to have, Hughie. Not in my place. Only when she said that about me being no better than a barmaid — well, there!" She touched his hand. "And the rest of the time? Did I — did I do right?"

What could he say? Only one thing, he thought. "Yes, darling, you're all right. Just don't be self-conscious. You'll soon get into the way of things. Now what about coming out with me, and strolling round the gardens?"

"Why, I'd love to, Hughie, but are you sure we've time? Hylda said it was time to dress."

"Rot! She probably said that to escape from your wrath, darling. Dinner's not till eight. Coming?"

They went downstairs together, and in the hall met Mrs. Salinger, who was looking fragile and pathetic.

"Hullo, mater! I'm going to show Laura round. Come too?"

"I think I won't, dearest. I am a little tired." A sigh fluttered past her lips. "This has been rather an exciting day, and you know my nerves are never very good. I am going to lie down for a while before dinner." She looked sadly at Laura, smiled with an effort, and went very slowly upstairs.

Hugh's face had darkened, for he knew his mother well enough to read in these signs a mute reproach. Laura too felt some hostility in the air; depression settled on her again. Hugh and she went on to the terrace, and wandered away arm in arm towards the rose garden. Out in the sunlight depression lifted. Hugh forgot his mother's attitude in showing Laura over the grounds, and telling her anecdotes of his childhood; Laura, away from the oppressive atmosphere cast by Lady Powis and Mrs. Salinger, could relax her tension. Strolling across the lawns with her Hugh thought that if only she could be as natural with his family as she was

with him alone the Salingers might yet be won over.

They met Salinger in the stableyard. He had seen them before they saw him, and had watched them curiously. He saw Laura's face, ardent, smiling; heard the ripple of her laugh. Here then was another Laura than the nervous, faintly genteel woman who had sat stiffly in the drawing-room a while back, rather stiltedly answering the questions put to her. He waited for them to come up with him, and took Laura into the stables. He reflected, with a smile a little sardonic, that for one who was widely experienced in women he made small headway. Laura retired into her shell, and was careful of her speech. Beside them Hugh chafed impotently. They walked back presently to the house, and found Joyce reading in the hall. She looked up for a moment, and then down again at her book.

Hugh's irritation found a vent. "Don't mind us," he said sarcastically.

"I've got rather a headache," Joyce said. She got up unwillingly. "Have you been out ?"

"Showing Laura round. Where did you get to ?"

"I went part of the way with Stella."

"You might have come with us, I should have thought."

She flushed, and turned her shoulder. Hugh made as if to speak, and then seemed to think better of it. But he was frowning as he watched Joyce walk towards the stairs.

When Laura was changing for dinner she heard Joyce's voice on the passage, and, a moment later heard the door of Hugh's dressing-room open.

"Joyce !" Hugh's tone was imperative.

There was a pause. Then Laura heard Joyce say: "What is it ?"

"Want you. Come here a moment."

"I must go and change."

"Damn it, you can wait ten minutes. I want to speak to you."

Again there was a pause. Then Joyce said reluctantly: "Oh, all right!" The door shut again, and Laura heard no more.

In the dressing-room Joyce faced her brother with defiance in her attitude. "Well?"

"Look here," said Hugh, "what's the meaning of your behaviour? Cheery sort of welcome you've given me, haven't you? I'd just like to know."

She twisted her hands together. "I should think you do know!" she blurted out.

"I know nothing at all. Come on, out with it!"

Her face puckered. "How could you, Hugh? That woman — !"

"Are you talking about Laura?"

"Oh, don't pretend! You know I am!"

"Then you'd better be careful," Hugh said. "I'll stand a good deal, but you'll kindly remember that Laura is my wife, and I'll have no criticism of her from you or anyone else. Got that?" She did not answer; she was trying not to cry. After a moment he went on, speaking jerkily. "We'd better have this out once and for all. From the moment we entered this house you've gone out of your way to be rude to my wife. Well, that's got to stop. Downstairs, just now you chose to ignore her, and damned ill-bred it was. I don't want a row: you and I have always got on jolly well, but you may as well understand that if you're going to turn up your nose at Laura I'm through with you." He saw that the tears were rolling down her cheeks, and relented a little. "And that's that," he said, patting her shoulder. "Don't be an ass, Joy. I want you to be friends with Laura, and help her."

She twitched her shoulder from under his hand. "Friends with her! When she's caught you and made

a fool of you, and made us all look ridiculous! She's spoiled everything, and you talk as though — I'm not going to be friends with her! I'm not, I'm not!"

"It may interest you to know," said Hugh, very white about the mouth, "that you are not fit to black her shoes."

She was at the door, sobbing drily. "Very well then, you won't want me to be friends with her. And perhaps one day you'll see what a damned fool you've been."

Away in her bedroom Laura heard the slam of a door, and the rush of impetuous footsteps down the passage. Her heart sank. She waited uneasily for Hugh to come through into her room. He did not come, and after a while she went to him.

She saw at once that something was wrong. He had that tight-lipped look on his face which told of inward rage. His eyes as they met hers were bright and very cold. She smiled doubtfully. "Was that your sister who was in here, Hughie?"

"Yes," he said curtly.

She hesitated, fidgetting with the brushes on his dressing table. "I couldn't help hearing, Hughie."

"Hearing? What did you hear?"

"Nothing. That is, not what you were saying, but — but your voice — your cross voice, Hughie dear. And — and her slamming your door."

"Well, never mind," he said, relieved. "Joyce and I often have rows."

"I couldn't help wondering whether it was p'raps about me." She looked up fleetingly and went on before he could speak. "I could see all along she didn't like me. Well, why should she, after all? And I could see how fond she is of you."

"She has a curious way of showing it," said Hugh savagely.

"P'raps she's jealous, dearie. Because you're her only brother, and you've always told me what pals you were.

Well, it must come a bit hard on her having me forced on her like this. And she's angry — well, disappointed — at your marrying beneath you. Anyone 'ud understand that, wouldn't they ? I mean, I'd feel the same if George brought home a wife that wasn't good enough for him."

Hugh put his arm round her waist. "You angel ! What are you trying to say ?"

She stroked his cheek lingeringly. "Only that I would hate you to quarrel with your sister on account of me, dearie. I daresay she'll p'raps take to me a bit better after a while. But it's dead certain she won't if you go and put her back up right at the start."

Hugh gave a little laugh. "Sorry. Afraid the deed's done."

Her heart sank. "You have had a quarrel then ? I wish you'd tell me, Hughie."

"Yes, I have. If you must know, she was utterly insufferable."

"About me ?"

"Yes — damn her eyes !"

"Oh, Hughie, hush ! What did you say ?"

"Told her she wasn't fit to black your shoes," said Hugh, with relish. "Nor is she."

"Hughie, you shouldn't have. Oh, my dear, why ever did you ? And she so fond of you ! How'll she be able to help hating me after you've said a thing like that ?"

"She asked for it. She seemed to think she could say what she liked about you. Well, I undeceived her."

"It was dear of you to stick up for me, Hughie, but it makes things worse. She'll think I've set you against her."

"Let her think it. Don't you worry your head about Joyce. Why, you darling silly, you're not going to make a tragedy out of one of Joyce's tantrums ?"

"I can't help it, Hughie. You see, you've quarrelled

with her, and though I didn't mean it, it's my fault. It was because of me, and it's as though I was making trouble the very first day."

"My dear girl, what sort of a skunk do you think I should be if I allowed people to criticize my wife? If I'd let her go on, you might have had cause for complaint."

"I know. Oh, I wasn't blaming you, dear," she said hastily. "It just couldn't be helped, I expect. Only never you mind about sticking up for me if it means a row with your people." She kissed his chin, mistily smiling. "And just you see if you can't make it up with her, Hughie. My, look at the time! And me not finished dressing."

There was no opportunity to make it up with Joyce that evening, for she sent a message downstairs that her headache was worse and she had gone to bed. Everyone knew why she had sent this excuse, and everyone pretended to believe in the headache. Mrs. Salinger, annoyed at such uncontrolled behaviour, and feeling that Joyce had lowered herself, even went so far as to invent a message of regret that Joyce did not feel well enough to appear at dinner. Lady Powis said that modern girls were deplorably neurotic, which was no doubt the result of cocktails and late hours.

Dinner was something of an ordeal to Laura. The table seemed very large; there was an alarming array of forks, and the presence of a butler throughout the meal made her nervous. She felt all the time that he was watching how she waited to see which fork Salinger used for each dish before she dared touch one of her own. The Salingers seemed unaware of his presence: Laura did not think that she could ever acquire that magnificent unconcern. When Penny said softly: "White wine or red, madam?" she whispered: "Red, please," because she dared not ask for water in case it was "not

done." A moment later he was at Mrs. Salinger's elbow, and Mrs. Salinger said clearly: "Water, please."

Salinger was talking to Laura, but he turned his head to say: "My dear Emmy, we have to drink the bride's health."

Mrs. Salinger felt that Charles went too far. His sister, from long experience of him, decided that he was bent on annoying her.

"Of course," said Mrs. Salinger. "I had forgotten." She allowed Penny to pour a little wine into her glass.

Salinger bowed to Laura. "Our best wishes," he said. "And to our better acquaintance," he added, as a private toast.

Laura saw that everyone was drinking her health, and blushed. In the candlelight her eyes shone warm and lustrous. "Thank you," she said, bereft of other words. "Thank you very much." She looked across the table at Hugh, and saw that he was pleased. Evidently her simple words had been enough. Yet she had felt them to be bald and inadequate.

The wine loosened her tongue a little; she could talk more naturally, she found; especially to Salinger, exerting himself to draw her out. He paid her a deft compliment, and was amused at her confusion; he made her laugh involuntarily; he shocked her a little; he wanted to hear about Italy, and never for an instant did he allow his conversation to creep above her head. He made jokes that she could appreciate; he appeared to be genuinely interested in all she had to say. Incidentally he appalled his sister and Emmeline. But Laura warmed to his charm, and forgot, for a while, to be refined. He had the gift of making any woman he chose feel that she was the only person in the room he cared to talk to, and this could not but gratify Laura. She did not know that it was done on purpose. She only thought: "Well, it's just as easy to talk to him as to anybody." She was

so absorbed in conversation that Lady Powis had to wait quite ten minutes before she could get up from the table, and then she only managed to draw Laura's attention by coughing.

Laura remembered the dinner-party at the White House, realized that Lady Powis had been waiting for her, and was stricken to silence. She got up as Lady Powis pushed back her chair, and thought dismally that they all must suppose she did not know that ladies left the dining-room before the gentlemen. And she did know; Gabrielle had taught her. She wished that she could tell them that.

"Don't forget those snapshots," Salinger said, as she passed him. "I must certainly see them. I shall expect to find you with them when we join you."

Lady Powis reflected that Charles was positively ridiculous.

CHAPTER XV

BREAKFAST at Alleyne was for Laura a bewildering meal. When asked at what time it began Hugh said he didn't know, in a sleepy voice. Laura shook him awake. "You must know, Hughie! Why ever didn't I ask that starchy girl who brought the hot water? Do you think half past eight would be right?"

"Any time you like," grunted Hugh, shutting his eyes again.

"Hughie, please! What time are you going to have it?"

"Dunno. Tennish, I think. Do stop worrying!"

"Ten!" Laura was shocked. "You can't!"

Hugh made no reply, and it seemed probable that he had gone to sleep again. Laura got up and went into the bathroom.

Hugh showed no signs of getting up when she came back into the room, so she dressed, and eyed him wistfully for a moment, and then, being wise in the ways of the male before breakfast, went downstairs alone. Outside the dining-room door she paused a moment to summon up courage. Would all the family be assembled? Would the butler be standing like a mute behind Salinger's chair? She drew a deep breath, and went in. The only people there were Lady Powis and Hylda, and they both appeared to have reached the marmalade stage.

"Ah, good morning, Laura!" said Lady Powis. "Come and sit down. I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm afraid I'm late. I didn't know what time you had breakfast." She saw that Salinger's

plate had been used, and was aghast. "Oh, I am late! I'm very sorry, Lady Powis."

"No, you're not," said Hylda. "Rather early, on the contrary. There isn't any set time for breakfast. Sit anywhere you like. What would you like to eat?" She got up and went to the sideboard. Laura saw a row of hot dishes. "Fish? Eggs? Kidneys?"

So much choice bewildered Laura. She said: "An egg, please," and hesitated between getting up and staying where she was. "Can't I do it?" she asked nervously.

"No, sit still, I'll do it."

"Tea or coffee, Laura?" said Lady Powis.

"I'd like coffee, please."

"Ring the bell, Hylda," commanded Lady Powis.

Laura felt hot and then cold. "I'd — I'd just as soon have tea, if it's any trouble," she stammered.

"Dear me, no! But this is not hot. . . . Some fresh coffee, Penny." She bent towards Laura. "I believe you know our friend Maurice Quillinan, do you not?"

Laura looked up quickly. "Oh yes! He came out to Villefranche before — before we were married."

"Ah yes!" said Lady Powis. "Quite so. I see in this morning's paper that he has a new book out."

"What did you make of him?" inquired Hylda.

"I liked him. He was so very kind," said Laura simply.

The door opened and Joyce came in. "Morning," she said briefly, and strolled to the sideboard.

Lady Powis looked at her with disfavour. "Good morning, Joyce," she said precisely. "I hope your headache is better."

"Yes, thanks." Joyce went to sit on the opposite side of the table to Laura. "Is there any fresh tea, or is it already stewed?"

"Ring the bell," said Lady Powis. Breakfast at Alleyne seemed to Laura to consist of incessant bell-ringing.

"I was just saying that I see in the paper that Maurice has a new book out. Laura has met Maurice, you know."

"Yes," said Joyce. "I know." She raised her eyes to look across the table at Laura. "I think he was at your wedding, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He — he saw us off to Florence," Laura answered.

Joyce relapsed into silence. Lady Powis folded her napkin and rose. "If you have finished, Hylda, there are one or two little things I want you to do for me." They went out together, and Laura and Joyce were left alone.

There was a long silence. Joyce did not lift her eyes from her plate; Laura sat watching her, wondering whether she dared speak, or whether she had best pay Joyce back in her own coin. The silence got on her nerves: she spoke with would-be lightness. "I'm afraid Hughie's likely to be the last," she said. "Unless Mrs. Salinger is."

"My mother breakfasts in bed," said Joyce.

"Then he will be the last. Get him to wake up this morning I could not."

"Really?" drawled Joyce.

Laura was nettled. If this was the way the Salingers behaved she would rather be born a Burton. The Burtons might do things which the Salingers considered common, but they would never be guilty of rudeness towards a guest. The timid note went out of her voice. "Miss Salinger — "

"I really think you will have to call me by my Christian name," interrupted Joyce. "You happen to be my sister-in-law."

"I shouldn't like to call you Joyce when I know you don't like me, Miss Salinger."

"I'm afraid you will have to," said Joyce indifferently. "You needn't think that I mind."

"But p'raps I do," said Laura. "I've — I've got my feelings too, Miss Salinger."

Joyce's lip curled. "Oh, do as you please, of course. But I prefer to keep up appearances."

"I see," Laura said. "Pretend you get on with me all right when there are people about, and really hate me ? I expect that's good breeding."

"Please don't imagine that I hate you."

"I'm not worth it. Is that it ?"

Joyce found this direct form of warfare disconcerting. She coloured, and said: "Really Laura, don't you think this is all rather vulgar ?"

"I'm not a judge of that, Miss Salinger. I'm trying to be straight with you. It isn't my notion of good manners to say one thing and mean another."

Joyce found nothing to say to this. Laura went on after a moment. "I know you can't be pleased at Hughie having married me, and I don't want you to think I don't understand the way you feel. But right or wrong he did marry me, and I mean to do my best to be a good wife to him. So couldn't you — couldn't we — "

"My brother's marriage has nothing to do with me," said Joyce, furious at being forced into a false position.

Laura struggled on. "Why, of course it has, Miss Salinger, though it's nice of you to say that. But last night — you mustn't be offended, but I couldn't help hearing — you and Hughie — quarrelled, and I wanted — I made up my mind I must tell you I'm sorry, and I didn't mean a thing like that to happen."

Joyce got to her feet, quivering. "That's too much !" she said. "You to intervene between Hugh and me ! I've no doubt you think you are being marvellously magnanimous, pretending to be a saint to put me in the wrong, but I'm not having any, thanks ! What happens between Hugh and me is our affair, and not yours." She gave a hysterical laugh. "You to play the peace-

maker between us! Why, it's positively impertinent!"

"I'm sorry you take it like that," said Laura steadily. "I didn't mean it that way." She heard a man's step on the stairs. "That's Hughie! Don't let him see we've had words!"

Hugh came in. "Hullo! Only you two? How's the head, Joyce?"

"All right, thanks." Joyce stayed undecidedly by her chair.

Once more Quillinan's book made itself useful. "We were talking about Mr. Quillinan, Hugh," said Laura. "He's got a new book out."

"Has he? We must look the old rotter up. Don't dash away, Joy."

"I must. Mother wants me to go to the village for her," Joyce said jerkily, and went out.

She got small comfort from Mrs. Salinger, fretful amongst her pillows. Mrs. Salinger said that if she could be civil to Laura so too could Joyce. This led on to strictures on the manners of Joyce's set, and the lack of consideration of the modern generation for their elders. Joyce flung away from her mother only to run into Salinger, who pinched her chin, and told her to behave herself.

None of this was calculated to make her like Laura. She became frigidly polite, and when, at the end of three days, she announced her intention of going away to stay with friends, Laura could only feel thankful.

James Powis returned from his reading tour, and proved to be a mild, studious young man, lacking in curiosity, and retiring to the point of shyness. There was nothing to be feared from him. He took as much interest in Laura as he took in anybody, and when his mother deplored Laura's gentility he said he hadn't noticed it. Laura rather liked him, but he was inclined to be nervous with her, and showed small disposition to become intimate.

Laura and Hugh stayed for six weeks at Alleyne. It did not take Laura long to master the ways of the house; at the end of a fortnight she could even feel herself more or less at home there, and no longer fear to take a book out of the library, or leave a paper on a chair. With Salinger she developed a queer friendship, but she would have preferred to be friends with her mother-in-law. From Salinger she felt that she learned nothing. When she made a slip in her speech to Mrs. Salinger, Mrs. Salinger would sometimes correct her: "We don't say 'and that,' dear Laura." The correction, made in that gentle, faintly outraged voice, covered her with confusion, but she was grateful for it. Salinger never corrected, never showed by the smallest sign that she had erred. Once, when she corrected herself she ventured to say: "I want people to tell me when I say things wrong, Uncle Charles."

He drew lazily at his cigar. "I see you wish to make your stay at Alleyne a Purgatory."

"No, not that. But I must learn, and you — you don't help me at all."

"My dear Laura, I enjoy you as you are."

"I don't see how you can."

"Has no one but myself told you that you are a most charming woman ? I am not nearly guileless enough to believe that."

"No. Oh, Hughie, perhaps, but that's different."

He surveyed her. "Yet Quillinan saw you."

She laughed. "Well, he didn't say I was charming. He's not that sort."

"Is that a gentle reproof ?"

"Oh, how could I ? Of course not. But really you do say such things, Uncle Charles. Only I know you don't mean them."

"So few women have been able to realize that," he murmured. "Speaking generally, the conceit of your sex is unbounded. But you are not conceited."

"Well, I haven't got much to be conceited about. And though I'm sure it's very kind of you to say I'm charming, I know very well it'd be more use if I didn't make mistakes in my talk, and that sort of thing."

"Do you want my candid opinion?"

"Yes, I do. Naturally."

"Amazing creature. Well, I think you make a great mistake in allowing yourself to bother about it at all. You are apt, my dear, to destroy your charm when you put on party manners."

She wrinkled her brow. "You mean you like me better when I don't try to behave like all of you?"

"Infinitely better."

She pondered it a while. "Because I don't do it naturally? I see the idea. But I've got to go on trying and trying till I get it right, Uncle Charles. You've treated me like what I always thought a real gentleman would behave to people — "

"You flatter me, Laura."

"No, let me go on. As I said, you've made no difference, and you couldn't have been nicer to a duchess, but it's no good you telling me you wouldn't rather I'd been a real lady, because I wouldn't believe you. A lady like Miss Hepplewhite. Hugh's own sort."

"It would have been an advantage," he admitted. "But you will have noticed that I am not allowing it to worry me."

"Well," said Laura frankly, "as far as I can make out you never let anything worry you, Uncle Charles."

"My golden rule, Laura."

"Yes, that's all very well, but other people don't think the same. Far from it. It's all right when I'm just sitting here talking to you, but I've got to go about among Hughie's friends, meeting people, and having them to dinner, and talking to them in the way they're accustomed to, and giving them the right things to eat. Uncle Charles, I used to think a good dinner would be

soup, and a roast, and a tart to follow, but Hughie talks about grouse and some bird I've never even heard of. Quails? Yes, that was it. Well, don't you see?"

"Perfectly, my dear. You have, I am afraid, an exceedingly hard fight ahead of you."

Laura looked down at her lightly clasped hands. "You have to pay an awful big price for things, don't you, Uncle Charles?"

He did not misunderstand her. "Some people do, my dear, undoubtedly. Unfortunately for you you appear to be one of those who take life rather seriously."

"I think it is serious," she said.

"Perhaps you are right," he conceded. "I have never permitted myself to think so." He threw away the butt of his cigar. "The only advice I can offer you — and you will not take it — is not to care too greatly for anything or anybody. It is remarkably good advice, but I can see you don't think so."

"Why, how could I, Uncle Charles? I don't think you can really mean it either."

"I assure you I do."

"Not care too much for Hughie?" she said incredulously.

"Above all, not too much for him."

"Oh, you mustn't say a thing like that. It's dreadful. You don't understand. I mean — you like to speak as if you didn't. If you love a person like I love Hughie you don't think how much you love them, and try not to. There isn't anything you wouldn't do for them, and be glad to do. You can't love by halves, Uncle Charles."

"I understand that you can't," he said. "But you remember that I didn't expect you to take my advice."

She was vaguely troubled by this conversation, which seemed in some way to create a gulf between herself and Salinger. It was no use expecting him to help her, she thought. He was charming always, but he would not

put himself out of the way for her. More than that, on his own showing he cared very little for anyone. He seemed to stand apart from people, amused by their joys and sorrows, himself untouched. This gentle cynicism was alien to Laura's nature; it even horrified her.

She saw a good deal of Stella Hepplewhite, who was often at Alleyne, and several times she went to the Hepplewhites' house. Colonel Hepplewhite was bluff and very kindly; Mrs. Hepplewhite had a quiet motherliness that at once set Laura at her ease. She found herself thinking with relief that the Upper Classes were not, after all, invariably like Lady Powis and Mrs. Salinger.

Stella still puzzled her. She was so calm, so quiet: you could not tell what she was thinking, though you could see she was thinking a lot. Those blue eyes told nothing. Even when they smiled Laura thought they hid something. She was shy of Stella, yet could not tell why. The girl seemed to be encased in some armour,—but armour was the wrong word, for it implied something hard, and a little cruel. It was more like a mist that she wrapped round herself, and which one could not penetrate. Laura tried to convey her impressions to Hugh, who only laughed, and said: "She's reserved. Always was. Rather aloof. But when you know her she's a dear."

"She reminds me of a fairy tale I used to read, about the snow maiden," said Laura.

"Yes, that's rather good," nodded Hugh. "She isn't a bit cold, though."

No, she was not cold. You had only to look into her eyes to see that. Nor was she hard. Joyce was hard, with her plucked eyebrows, and her scarlet mouth; Hylda was hard, and so, in spite of her soft manner, was Mrs. Salinger. Laura suspected that Lady Powis, who seemed to be made of iron, was not hard at the bottom. It was perhaps the same with Stella. Her pale beauty

promised a cold nature, but under the cool mist was a warm creature, as vital even as Laura herself.

Stella used to come over with her dogs to take Laura for walks. They did not talk a great deal, for Stella never spoke when she had nothing to say, but it was during these walks that Laura learned most. Stella never corrected her, never seemed to instruct: they were not intimate enough for that; but she told Laura much, and taught her some of the little important things that mattered so tremendously. It was Stella who saw to it that Laura bought brogue shoes, and wore tweeds instead of town-clothes, but she saw to it so tactfully that Laura never had even a suspicion that Stella thought she did not know what clothes should be worn in the country. From Stella Laura learned that huntsmen wore pink, and not red coats; that hounds were by no means dogs. She learned what "preserves" were, and when grouse shooting began; and began dimly to understand the aims and ideals of this strange, country-gentleman class. A queer life they led, she thought, always hunting or shooting something, or playing golf. She could not approve of it. Work, which was to her one of Life's most serious things, they did not appear to know. The thing that concerned them most nearly was "the land," and for this she could feel no sympathy. She heard Salinger say once: "Milward tells me he will have to let Long Acre go. A bad business." She had discovered that Long Acre was nothing more than a piece of land, not even near Milward's house. Yet the Salingers shook their heads over it and treated it as a tragedy. When she begged enlightenment of Hugh she understood no better. He said: "Awfully sad. You see the Milwards have owned all the land south of us since the year One."

"Yes, but it isn't as though he'd had to sell his garden," persisted Laura. "Or the house. There'd be something in it then. But a lot of fields like that — I don't see it."

"You don't understand," said Hugh. "Supposing Uncle Charles had to sell Limpley Copse?"

"I don't see that it'd make much difference. Of course it'd be a pity if we couldn't any longer walk in it. But really I don't see what anyone wants with such a lot of land."

"That sounds rather Communistic," said Hugh. "You mustn't talk like that here, you know."

"I can see I mustn't. I only wanted to try and understand," she said meekly.

He tried to explain, but found that he could not put his own feelings into words. She said: "I see," but he knew that she did not.

Visitors to Alleyne were always something of an ordeal, but she found them all invariably polite, and although she had nothing in common with anyone who came, and was shy of all, from afar she could like them, and wish herself on their level.

The County received her: Salinger saw to that. Mrs. Salinger did not want her to be introduced into Society. She even begged Salinger not to attempt to foist Laura on the County. She said it would be more than she could bear, and that people would not like it.

"I am not concerned with what they like," said Salinger, impervious to pleading.

"No one will receive her!"

"On the contrary, they will all receive her. Don't be foolish, Emmy, and for God's sake don't cry. You know I can't bear to see a pretty woman in tears."

Lady Powis unexpectedly supported her brother. "Emmeline, you have no brain," she announced. "I certainly do not intend to behave as though I were ashamed of Hugh's wife."

"I cannot pretend, Lilian," sighed Mrs. Salinger.

"Then you will be more foolish than I had imagined," said Lady Powis. "Do you suppose that anyone would refuse to receive Lady Salinger?"

"Don't, Lilian ! She isn't that !"

"She will be," said Lady Powis heavily. "I shall give one or two quiet dinners, quite informal, since we are still in mourning."

The informal dinners took place. No one refused to meet Laura, no one having met her refused to meet her again, but no one could think anything but that Hugh Salinger had made a shocking *mésalliance*. People talked amongst themselves, and everyone at Alleyne knew that they talked, but there was no outward sign. People said: "Heard about Hugh Salinger ? A bad business. Must have cut old Salinger up." Others said: "By Jove, though, he takes it well ! Wonderful old chap, Salinger. Carried it off splendidly." Some pitied Hugh, and foretold disaster; some were sorry for Laura; many were secretly pleased at this jolt to the Salinger pride.

Mercifully Laura knew nothing of these murmurs. But Hugh knew, or could guess, and it touched him on the raw. Salinger knew too, but chose to take a slightly saturnine pleasure in the whole affair. Lady Powis knew, and ignored magnificently. Mrs. Salinger knew, and shuddered.

"Sometimes I think that I shall never lift up my head again," she said once.

Lady Powis was quite unresponsive. "You know I have no patience with that exaggerated way of talking, Emmeline," she replied.

Mrs. Salinger put her handkerchief to her eyes, but only for a moment. Tears were no weapons with which to fight her sister-in-law, for Lady Powis, unlike Salinger, was quite unmoved by the sight of a pretty woman crying. "Ah, Lilian, but she is not your son's wife," she pointed out. "I wonder what you would say if James brought home a shop girl ?"

"I cannot conceive of James doing anything so imprudent," said Lady Powis. "But I trust I should not make a fool of myself."

"And so that is what you think!" cried Mrs. Salinger tragically. "That is all the sympathy I am to expect from you!"

"My dear Emmeline, I can only say that I consider you have brought this on yourself," said Lady Powis, with beautiful frankness. "You never made the smallest attempt to control Hugh, and, as I said before, here is the natural result. Not that I think it is as bad as might have been expected, for I do not."

This surprised Mrs. Salinger so much that she forgot the first part of this speech. "What could possibly be worse?" she demanded.

"A chorus girl," answered Lady Powis, who considered the stage as something more than ordinarily depraved. "That I could not have borne. No one could deplore Laura's commonness more than I do, but I am bound to say that she seems a very good-natured and upright young woman. I have been agreeably surprised. I expected an adventuress, and I must confess that I was wrong."

"Nothing will convince me that she did not set out to entrap my poor Hugh!" declared Mrs. Salinger.

"Then I can only say that you are being remarkably foolish, Emmeline."

"And look at the trouble she has made already!" continued Mrs. Salinger. "When I think of my two dear children being estranged from each other, can you wonder that I am bitter?"

"My recollection of the matter is that Joyce, in her usual headstrong fashion, brought the quarrel on her own head," said Lady Powis, who was nothing if not just. "I can't say that I was surprised, and indeed if my daughter had behaved in such a way I should have been horrified. However, you and I, Emmeline, have different ideas on the upbringing of children."

"Yes, dear," agreed Mrs. Salinger softly. "I often think that when I hear Hylda laying down the law to

people far older and wiser than herself. My poor Joyce is very highly strung, I am afraid. She takes after me in that respect."

"I am very fond of Joyce," said Lady Powis, "but I must say I think she is in danger of becoming neurotic if she does not learn to control herself. But I understand that self-control is the last virtue the modern girl wishes to acquire."

That seemed to sum up Joyce. Mrs. Salinger put a hand to her head, and closed her eyes as one with acute neuralgia. Lady Powis went placidly on with her needlework.

It pleased Hugh at about this time to teach Laura to drive a car. He had no intention of letting her learn on the Bentley, but there was a small runabout in the garage that Salinger placed at Laura's disposal. Indeed, when asked if she might learn to drive this car he told her that she might drive any of his cars. She was quite shocked at such an idea, and assured him she would not think of doing such a thing.

"You shall do just as you like, my dear," said Salinger. "Take the small car, and consider it your own. You must certainly have a car."

"Oh no!" Laura cried. "Thank you very much, Uncle Charles, but I couldn't do that. Besides we've got a car already."

"You might like to have one of your own," suggested Salinger.

"You are good to me!" Laura said. "But lord, what would I do with a car of my own? And we couldn't afford to run two. No, I only want to borrow it to learn on."

Salinger raised an eyebrow. "Couldn't afford it? Well, I must see about that."

She was genuinely distressed. "Oh, I didn't mean — oh, please, you're mistaken! I never meant — Why, we've got plenty of money! Indeed, when I think of

all you do for Hugh — for us, I am downright ashamed. No really, Uncle Charles, I should be dreadfully upset if you was to try and give Hugh more money. I just can't bear the thought of living on you."

"Can't you ?" said Salinger. Amusement gleamed in his eye. "Well, don't distress yourself, my dear."

But he had a business talk with Hugh, who was untroubled by such qualms as agitated Laura. As a result of this talk Hugh told Laura that they must look for a flat. He did not tell her that Salinger was to allow him another thousand pounds a year, for that seemed to him unnecessary. But when he looked at flats in Mayfair the truth came out, because Laura was so insistent that the rents must be more than they could afford. She tried to drag him towards Kensington; she was surprised when he said: "Right out there ? Good God, no !"

"Hughie, I know the rents here are too big."

"Well, as it happens we needn't bother about that. Uncle Charles has increased my allowance."

Involuntarily she said: "Oh, you haven't let him ?"

"Of course I've let him," said Hugh, annoyed. "We can't live on two thousand a year."

"Hughie, you could have got something to do," she said sadly.

"Oh, don't be so silly, Laura ! Naturally Uncle Charles had to allow me more. I'm his heir now. You forget that."

She was silent, but a sturdy sense of independence revolted. She could feel no pleasure in looking at flats for which Salinger would pay. All sense of a home left her. Rather listlessly she followed Hugh over yet another one.

It was he who chose the flat off South Audley Street. The rent frightened Laura; even she, who thought Hugh's income incredible wealth, could see that to spend twelve hundred of it on house-rent was out of all proportion. She ventured to say: "We should be spend-

ing nearly half our income on rent, dear. That's not business."

"Oh well !" he conceded, "I daresay they'll come down a bit."

"Hughie, we could have such a nice flat for half the money !" she coaxed. "Now, wasn't that a dear little one we saw yesterday, near Sloane Street."

"Too small. You couldn't swing a cat in it. Besides, I don't think we want to live right in my mother's pocket, do we ?"

"Well, what about that one down Chelsea way ?"

"I loathe Chelsea," said Hugh.

There did not seem to be anything more to say. Yet she tried again. "Hughie, p'raps I don't like Mayfair," she suggested.

"Why not ?"

"Why don't you like Chelsea ?" she countered.

"Damp and out of the way and long-haired."

The idea that it was damp certainly weighed with her. "Oh ! But do you think it would matter being so close to your mother, if we had the flat in Cadogan Gardens ?"

Hugh was sick of the argument. "I've already told you I don't like that flat," he said rather sharply.

It was no good fighting, no good coaxing. She made up her mind that she would have to let him have the flat he wanted, and afterwards economize as best she could. "Very well, Hugh."

His ill-temper left him. He began to point out to Laura the advantages of the flat off South Audley Street.

When they returned to Alleyne next day, and Mrs. Salinger heard where they proposed to live, she chose to take it almost as a personal insult. She looked expressively towards Laura, and compressed her lips.

"She thinks it's my doing," thought Laura.

"Of course where you choose to live is no concern of mine," said Mrs. Salinger, in the voice of a martyr.

"But if I can live out in Hans Place — However, I suppose you know what you are about."

If only Mrs. Salinger would help her, Laura thought, how much easier it would be. They might influence Hugh between them. But she could not confide in Mrs. Salinger, could not tell her that it was not her wish to pay twelve hundred pounds a year for a home.

Lady Powis was quite outspoken. "You have no money-sense, Hugh. You never had. If you have not signed the contract I advise you to go no further with it. You should allow your wife some say in the matter."

Laura flushed gratefully. Lady Powis might disapprove of her new niece, she might speak in that curt, hard voice, but she never permitted her hostility to make her unjust.

Hugh was feeling savage. He gave a little goaded laugh. "My dear aunt, left to Laura we should live in Earl's Court," he said. He saw the colour heighten in her cheeks, and repented. "She's the most economically minded person I ever knew," he added.

"And if you did live in Earl's Court," said Lady Powis, "I cannot see what difference it would make to you."

Furious at this reproof, furious at himself for having behaved, as he put it, like a cad, he snapped back at his aunt: "Very kind of you to take so much interest in my affairs, Aunt Lilian."

"Laura, a peach ?" interposed Salinger, in a bored voice. "Shall I choose one for you ?"

"Thank you, Uncle Charles," she murmured.

Mrs. Salinger took up the cudgels on Hugh's behalf. "Really, Lilian, I think if anyone has the right to criticize Hugh it is his mother," she said. "I am the person to advise him if he wants advice." Her blue eyes travelled to Laura's face, she allowed herself a tiny sigh. "Or rather, I was," she said softly. "Now of course, he has his wife, and I should not dream of interfering."

"Quite right, Emmy," said Salinger. "You have relinquished him into good hands. There, Laura!" He gave her the peach he had prepared for her.

Mrs. Salinger had to choke back the stinging words on her tongue. She looked reproachfully at Salinger, as one who would say: "How can you mock me so?" But Salinger was talking to Laura about his hothouses, and the look was wasted.

Decorating and furnishing the flat was the next problem that presented itself to Hugh and Laura, and here again they found themselves at variance. Having vacillated for three days between period furniture or modern, Hugh decided that they would be modern.

"More in keeping with a flat," he said. "Besides, old stuff costs the hell of a lot nowadays."

Laura felt hopeful. "Yes, I think I'd like new furniture best too," she said. "I didn't tell you, did I? — Your aunt has been so kind, and told me she thought there was quite a lot of spare furniture she could let us have from Eaton Place. And she said would we like the chest that's on the landing in the west wing here, and one or two other things?"

"Oh lord! I hope you got out of it?"

"Well, no. That is, I thanked her very much, and said I would have to speak to you. Wouldn't you like it, Hughie? I thought it would save us such a lot of money."

He did not tell her that Salinger had said the furniture for the flat should be his wedding-present to them. She would not understand; she would make an absurd fuss about it, try to persuade him not to accept the money. "All this stuff is far too heavy and ponderous for a flat," Hugh said. "You'll have to get out of it somehow or other. Tell her we've decided to go in for a very modern style."

"You — you couldn't tell her yourself, I suppose?" ventured Laura. "I mean — when she's been so kind

as to offer — it looks so ungrateful of me to refuse."

"Oh, you'll do it all right!" said Hugh. "You can explain it so that she'll understand."

Lady Powis understood better perhaps than Hugh would have liked, and did not in the least blame the shamefaced, troubled creature who so haltingly refused her offer. "Ah, Hugh wants to let his deplorable taste run riot, does he?" she said. "I should advise you to put a check on it, Laura. Perhaps you would be so good as to hand me that work-bag. It is on the table by the window. Thank you."

Laura would have liked to say more, but Lady Powis had sternly dismissed the subject. She was as unapproachable as ever, in spite of her justice.

A week later Hugh and Laura left Alleyne for a hotel in town. Decorators were in the flat, and the furniture must be bought.

When Hugh had spoken of modern furniture Laura had visualized chesterfields, solid chests of drawers, and footstools. She was disillusioned after the first day of driving from one odd, futuristic little shop to another. Hugh said that Line was Everything, and that they wanted to be distinctive. Laura had no such ambition. A dressing-table that stood only three feet from the ground, with long, unbordered mirrors rearing up from its severe base was to her an outlandish thing, and she said so. There were no drawers in it either, and all her life Laura had kept her gloves and her handkerchiefs in the top left-hand drawer of her dressing-table. The rest of the suite was correspondingly uncomfortable, and so austere in line, so plain in design, that it chilled her. It was made of new oak that had been treated with lime, so that it was hard to tell whether the colour was a pale biscuit or a cold grey. Hugh liked it. He began to talk of a black carpet and hangings to go with it.

"Not in my bedroom," said Laura firmly. "Not if I know it."

"What are your own ideas?" asked Hugh.

"If I've got to have that suite, Hughie, I'd like a bit of colour in my carpet."

"Perhaps you're right," said Hugh, and chose wine-red for her.

It was the same with every other room in the flat, with every room except the kitchen. Here Laura was unmolested. While Hugh hung a few engravings in the dining-room, and decided which of three water-colours should hang in the drawing-room (it seemed it was not possible to hang more than one) Laura was happy in choosing bright aluminium saucepans, long-handled frying-pans, mincing-machines, and elaborate plate-racks.

She was indebted to Lady Powis for her servants, but she could hardly be grateful. Lady Powis told her that she had better have a man and wife, and was able to give her the name of a good couple.

Laura, seeing all homeliness vanish before a butler, said hesitatingly that she thought of having just one maid, a girl to help her with the rough work.

"I do not think that you would find that that would do," said Lady Powis.

Mrs. Salinger raised her eyes from her book. "Hugh has not been accustomed to that sort of an existence, Laura," she said.

"I could make him comfortable," Laura ventured. "I know how to cook. I — I thought — in a flat — "

"Really, the idea of Hugh's wife doing the housework is too absurd," said Mrs. Salinger fretfully. "You must try and — acclimatize yourself more."

"Very well," Laura said.

But she was afraid of Bower, even afraid of Mrs. Bower. She thought that they summed her up and found her wanting. Mrs. Bower said that she was accustomed to housekeeping, and was ready to take the whole onus of it on to her own shoulders. Hugh

thought this a very good plan, when he heard of it. Laura wondered what would be left for her to do.

They moved into the flat. It smelled of paint still, and looked very new. Hugh's taste was modern, and he had an eye for colour and for his beloved Line. Yet Laura, standing in her black drawing-room with its flame cushions and curtains, splashes of vivid colour against the dull background, felt exiled and very lonely. It was no doubt smart, she could see it had style, but she would have given it all away for a little room with chintz curtains, and hassocks and many ornaments. To her this room was bare and forbidding. Hugh had said: "No overcrowding." The result, to Laura's eyes, was a severe barrenness. A work-basket in one corner, cheerful cloths over the polished tables, a fire-screen, would make it look more homely, but she could see, dimly, that none of these things could be put into such a room.

"I knew it would make a good background for you," said Hugh comfortably. "I designed it with an eye to you."

"Did you?" said Laura. For a blank moment it seemed to her that he could not know her if he thought that this was a fitting background for her.

"You don't like it?"

"No, Hughie. I don't. It's — it's so bare."

"You'll get used to it."

"It seems I've got to get used to an awful lot, Hugh."

"Oh very well, then, change it!" he said. "Have pink cushions and antimacassars, and knick-knacks. But don't expect me to admire it."

"No. You don't like my sort of rooms. I'll try and like yours," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. BURTON, sitting on the edge of one black chair, looking with faint dismay at the bronze statuette upon the mantel-shelf, sipped politely at her tea, and wondered how Laura could bear it.

Laura had lived in the flat for two months now, but this was the first time her mother had visited her. It was not safe to ask Mrs. Burton to come to tea when Hugh was at home, for he might walk in at any moment. But Hugh had gone away for a couple of nights, to Leicestershire.

"I'm sure it's all very smart," said Mrs. Burton rather timidly. "I should not choose black myself, but there! we don't all think alike, do we?"

"Hugh likes it," Laura said. "I've got used to it."

Mrs. Burton shot her a quick look, but evidently felt that she had best remain silent. She put down the fragile cup and saucer very carefully.

"More tea, Mother?"

"Well, just a half," said Mrs. Burton. "Though I believe I've had my two cups."

"These are such small cups it doesn't count," smiled Laura.

"They are small, aren't they? Not but what they're very pretty, I'm sure. You'd better take care you don't break them, Laura. I know what that thin china is."

"A friend of Hugh's — a Miss Hepplewhite — gave them to us." Laura handed the cup back to her mother. "You aren't eating anything," she said. "And I had that cake made especially for you, because it's your favourite. Nice time I had with Mrs. Bower too, teaching her how we like it."

In a burst of confidence Mrs. Burton said: "I tell

you what, Laura, I couldn't stand having that man popping in and out of the room waiting on me, not if I was you. He fairly gives me the creeps. I don't know how you can put up with it."

"He frightens me too," confessed Laura.

"Well, you don't show it, my dear. Wonderful it is, the way you give him his orders, just as though you were born to it." She looked round her dubiously. "Somehow I don't seem able to get used to the idea of you living in the lap of luxury like this, with a butler, and a car, and I don't know what-all."

"Sometimes I think I never will get used to it," said Laura. "I don't mind Bower so much now — at least, I'm not afraid of him, that is. But I'd sooner have a simple sort of girl, Mother. Sometimes I think those Bowers sneer at me behind my back."

Mrs. Burton could not understand this. "What an idea! Them turn up their noses at you! And you to be a ladyship one day!"

Laura looked into the fire. "You'd think that 'ud count, wouldn't you? I always thought so. But it doesn't, Mother. Not really. Do you know, half the people I met down at Alleyne hadn't got any titles, but they're just as grand as if they had."

"Well, I don't see how you make that out," said Mrs. Burton.

"County people. Just plain Misters, most of them, but they think themselves lots better even than Earls and Dukes."

Mrs. Burton shook her head. "It's beyond me," she said. She fidgeted with the clasp of her handbag, watching Laura's downcast face. The lovely mouth drooped a little, and at sight of it Mrs. Burton forgot her constraint. "Laura dear, you're happy, aren't you?" she said anxiously.

Laura looked up. "Yes, Mother. Of course I'm happy."

"Father said he thought you looked down in the mouth the last time you came to see us. A bit pale, too."

"Why, Mother, how could I be anything but happy?" Laura said. "Sometimes I get a bit tired, that's all."

"I suppose — " Mrs. Burton spoke diffidently. "I suppose there isn't any reason for you to be taking extra care of yourself, dearie, just now?"

Laura shook her head. "No. I — I wish there were."

Mrs. Burton looked disappointed. "Well dear, you know your own business best, but I couldn't help wondering whether it wasn't time there was a little one on the way."

Laura bent to poke the fire. "Hugh doesn't want it yet," she said almost inaudibly.

Mrs. Burton looked shocked, and shook her head. "I can't somehow feel it's right, Laura."

"No. I — that is, I agree with Hugh, Mother."

"Men don't know anything about such things," said Mrs. Burton. "You take my advice, Laura, and stick up for yourself."

"What do you mean?" said Laura.

"Upper Ten or not," said Mrs. Burton darkly, "there's no reason why you should be put upon, my dear."

Laura put the poker down and sat straight in her chair. Mrs. Burton could see her eyes now, shining in the firelight. "There's no question of that, Mother. I don't say it isn't sometimes difficult with people, but never with Hughie. Never with him! You mustn't ever talk that way."

"I can see you're downright silly about that fine husband of yours," said Mrs. Burton, with a little laugh.

"He's everything to me," Laura said, with strange intensity. "All the world — I can't tell you."

"Well, that's as it should be, and I'm sure I'm very glad to hear it. Where is he today, my dear ?"

"He's gone into the country to stay with friends for two nights."

"What, and left you alone ?"

"It's hunting, you see," Laura explained, colouring. "People — people do."

"In all the thirty-five years I've been married Father's never once left me except when he's been sent on business." She recollected herself, and added: "Not but what I daresay things are different in your walk of life, Laura."

"Don't say that, Mother. *My* walk of life ! I'm not changed ! I'm the same as I always was."

"No, my dear, you aren't," Mrs. Burton answered. "It wasn't to be expected that you would be. Why, when I came up to this flat, and saw you just like a queen here, and heard you speak to that butler to the manner born, it came over me like a wave, how you'd changed. I'm not saying you behave stuck-up, or look down on us — there, Laura, give over, do !" She patted Laura's hands, clasping one of hers. "I shouldn't have been surprised if you had, but as I say you don't. It isn't that, but you can take it from me you have changed. Well, you don't belong to us any longer, dearie. That's what it is. I'm not complaining. As long as you're happy. Goodness gracious, who's that ?"

Through the shut doors a bell had sounded faintly. Laura sprang up, brushing away the tears that had started to her eyes. "Oh, I hope it's not a visitor ! And I forgot to tell Bower I wasn't at home. Who could it be ? It's probably only the post."

Mrs. Burton was rather agitatedly smoothing her dress. They heard the front door open, and waited breathlessly. A deep voice sounded.

"I'd better go," said Mrs. Burton, trying to collect her bag, gloves, and coat all at once.

Laura pushed her back into her chair. "No, you don't."

"Laura, if it's a visitor really I'd rather !" begged Mrs. Burton, flustered.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. A voice said: "That's all right. I'll announce myself."

"Oh, it's Mr. Quillinan !" cried Laura, and went quickly to the door.

"Mr. who ?" hissed her mother.

Maurice came in. "Hullo, Laura !" he said, taking her hand.

"Why, I never thought to see you today, Maurice !" she smiled. "If this isn't nice ! Mother, this is Mr. Quillinan, a great friend of Hugh's."

"Not of yours ?" said Maurice quizzically. He went to shake hands with Mrs. Burton. He looked far too large and cumbersome for Laura's drawing-room. Mrs. Burton, a short woman, found him towering above her. "How do you do ?" said Maurice, engulfing her hand in one of his.

"Very well, thank you," said Mrs. Burton in a gasp.

Laura pulled forward a third chair to the fire. "Sit down, Maurice, do. You'll have a cup of tea ? What brings you along ? Hughie's away."

Quillinan lowered himself into the chair. "I'm too late for tea, aren't I ?" he said, hopefully.

"What an idea ! I expect Bower's bringing a fresh cup in at this moment. Mother, Mr. Quillinan was the gentleman who helped Hughie and me to get married."

Mrs. Burton ventured to look at Maurice. "Is that a fact ? Well, and I thought I remembered the name. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Quillinan."

"And I you," he answered, selecting a sandwich from the cakestand at his elbow.

Bower came in with fresh tea. Laura became busied with a hostess' cares. "Now is that how you like it, Maurice ?"

"Yes, thanks, exactly right. What do you think of all this High Art, Mrs. Burton?" He waved his hand comprehensively. Mrs. Burton gathered that he meant the black drawing-room.

"I'm sure it's all very nice," she said cautiously. "Though I must say I wouldn't choose a black carpet myself."

"Just what I say," nodded Quillinan. "It's not only depressing, but it'll show every mark."

Mrs. Burton was completely set at her ease by this remark. She beamed upon him. "Well, it isn't often you'll hear a man think of a sensible thing like that," she said. "As for it looking like a funeral — well, I like a bit of colour myself. It's more homey."

Laura felt bound to defend Hugh's taste. "What about my cushions and curtains?" she demanded. "You couldn't have anything brighter than them, could you?"

"She's standing up for Hugh, Mrs. Burton. It's his doing, all this. He thinks it's artistic."

"Now then!" said Laura merrily. "Any more about Hughie, and you don't get another cup of tea, Maurice." She twinkled across at her mother. "He's always poking fun, Mother. Don't you listen to him."

"Well, I'm sure!" Mrs. Burton chuckled a little.

"All right, but have you seen Laura's bedroom?" asked Maurice. "A more uncomfortable looking apartment — "

"Now Maurice, you know that new oak's all the rage!" protested Laura. "It's treated with lime, Mother."

"Then it oughtn't to be," said Maurice. "And that diseased looking panelling in the hall is treated with beer."

"Beer?" echoed Mrs. Burton. "Now that you won't get me to believe!"

"As a matter of fact it is," confessed Laura. "Beer

and water-colour, I think Hugh said it was."

Mrs. Burton's jaw dropped. "Go on, Laura ! You're joking. What, using beer to paint your walls ? You don't really mean that ?"

"It does seem cracked," admitted Laura. "But Hughie says if one can't have old panelling one had better not try to fake it." She looked at Maurice, and blushed and laughed. "Well, what if I did say 'Hughie says' ? He's always on at me for that, Mother. I tell you what, Maurice, you're just teasing me because Hughie's not here to stick up for me."

"No, I'm not," he replied. "I'm here to ask you to come to the theatre with me tonight. I've got two tickets for a play I think you'd like. Now don't say Hughie said, because you don't know what he said. I met him at the Club this morning and he said you hadn't anything on tonight."

Mrs. Burton looked at her daughter with eyes of wonder. Laura only laughed. "I wasn't going to. Just as if Hughie would ever say I wasn't to enjoy myself ! You know I'd love to, Maurice. Thank you ever so. Where shall I meet you ?"

"I'll call for you," he said. "Can you be ready by seven ?"

"No, don't you do that," said Laura. "I can just as well meet you, and that'll save you coming out of your way."

Maurice rose, and dusted the crumbs from his trousers on to the black carpet. "Hughie said I was to look after you properly," he told her. His deep-set eyes were smiling. "I'll be round at seven." He turned to Mrs. Burton. "Good-bye, Mrs. Burton. I'm so glad to have met you."

Laura went with him to the front door. When she came back she found Mrs. Burton looking rather worried. "Laura, ought you to go out with a strange man like that ?" she inquired. "With your husband

away, I mean ?" She had an uneasy feeling that her daughter was drifting into the Fast Set, that strange, exotic body of people of whose scandalous doings she read in the papers.

"Why, of course, Mother ! He's Hughie's best friend. Good lord, I wouldn't go out with a stranger ! But Maurice's different." She came to the fire, and warmed her hands at it. "I'm glad you were here when he came. I wanted you to see him. I can't tell you how good he's been to me — a clever man like him ! He writes books, you know, and he's got I don't know how many friends, and yet he bothers himself about me. It's just like him to think of asking me out tonight. I'll bet he knew I'd be feeling down at the mouth the first time I've ever been separated from Hughie."

"He does seem a very kind gentleman," agreed Mrs. Burton. "Not a bit what you'd expect. I mean, so easy to talk to, and that." She began to pull on her gloves. "So I'll tell Gladys to bring Harry up tomorrow, in time for lunch, shall I ? You're sure you haven't got anything else to do ?"

"Of course I haven't," said Laura. "We'll have a real day of it. You tell Harry that if his mother won't ride on the elephant with him his auntie will."

Mrs. Burton went away, promising to deliver this message.

It was Gladys' first visit to the flat also; she and Laura were to take Harry to the Zoo, which expedition had been reserved for this his fifth birthday. Laura planned a careful lunch, and had bought a large white cake with pink icing on it, and five pink candles. Harry would cut it at tea, for which meal they would come back to the flat, and afterwards it would be wrapped up in a parcel for him to take home.

Gladys shared none of Mrs. Burton's views on the flat. She was ecstatic in her praise. "Oh, it is smart, Laura ! Oh, I say, I do like those silk curtains ! If the bell push

isn't enamel ! Well, I do call that arty ! Harry, don't you let me see you climbing over that sofa ! You keep those boots of yours off the furniture."

Lunch was not quite so cosy a meal as Laura had hoped it would be. Bower looked outraged, and when she said: "We'll wait on ourselves, Bower. You needn't stop in the room," she thought that she could detect a faint, supercilious smile on his face.

"Is that how you do things ordinarily ?" inquired Gladys, as soon as the door had softly closed behind Bower. "Having him carve on the side, and hand everything round ? I must say I think it'ud fidget me. Harry, don't put too much in your mouth." She transferred her attention from her son to the silver and glass. "Everything the very best, I can see that. The more I think of it the more I realize how well you've done for yourself, Laura."

"Gladys, I wish you wouldn't say that," Laura begged. "As though I'd married Hughie for — for what he could give me."

"Sorry !" said Gladys. "Still, you can't be surprised at it taking my breath away. And so he's gone hunting, has he ?" She broke off to tell Harry not to hold his spoon with his left hand. "Fancy being able to say: 'My husband's gone off for a day's hunting.' "

"He loves it so I couldn't ask him not to," said Laura, scarcely heeding. A worried crease appeared between her eyes. "I try not to be silly, and I know he rides awfully well but people do have accidents, even the best riders, and I can't help being nervous."

"I know," said Gladys sympathetically. "I feel just the same when Henry plays football. Still, you can't keep a husband wrapped up in cotton-wool, Laura."

Bower came back into the room at that moment, and Gladys became tongue-tied. When he had gone away again she said in a burst of confidence: "It's no use,

Laura, I can't get used to it. It seems like having lunch with a stranger."

Laura forced a jest, but her heart ached. First her mother, and now Gladys, said that she had changed. Dimly she knew that it was true. She did not belong to their world any longer. But whereas they thought she belonged to Hugh's world, she knew that she was as far removed from that as from theirs. She seemed to herself to be miserably placed between the two, a poor, striving creature, grown out of the old life but not into the new one.

The visit to the Zoo was a great success. Harry rode twice on an elephant, and once on a camel; he saw the sea-lions fed, and cried: "Oo, look at him!" and: "What's he doing now, Mummy?" and: "When can we see the monkeys?" But presently he grew tired, and became tearful, and Laura judged it time to go back to the flat. Harry was soothed by mysterious references to a surprise awaiting him, and finally stopped whining when he found that he was to ride in a taxi for the second time in one day.

Laura had told Bower to lay tea in the dining-room. There stood the cake, right in the middle of the table, with all five candles ready to be lit. Laura pushed Gladys and Harry into the drawing-room so that she might light the candles before Harry saw the Surprise. The matchbox was in her hand when she heard a bell ring. She hurried into the hall to interrupt Bower on his way to answer it, only to find that he must have been passing through the hall at the time. Already he had opened the door, and it was too late to tell him to say not at home.

"Ah, there you are, Laura," said a faint tired voice. "I am lucky to find you in."

Aghast, Laura went to meet her mother-in-law.

Mrs. Salinger was swathed in a coat of moleskin edged with smoked fox. A close hat framed her delicately

tinted face. It had a diamond arrow stuck in it at just the right angle, and there were diamond drops in her ears. She looked fragile, and expensive. She gave Laura one small, grey-gloved hand. "So glad to find you at home." Her wide eyes took in Laura's evident discomfiture. "You don't look very pleased to see me," she remarked.

"Oh, yes — I mean, of course I am, Mrs. Salinger. But I wasn't expecting you. Won't you come into the drawing-room ? I've got my sister and her little boy up for the day."

"Indeed ? How nice for you !" said Mrs. Salinger, faintly disappointed to find that Laura's confusion was due to nothing more guilty than the visit of a sister. "I will only look in for a moment. I told Hugh I would call while he was away."

Laura opened the drawing-room door. Harry's voice hailed her. "Is the s'prise ready yet, Auntie ?"

Gladys saw the elegant figure beside Laura, and speedily hushed Harry, who stood with his mouth hanging open, staring at Mrs. Salinger.

"Gladys, this is my — this is Mrs. Salinger," said Laura. "My sister, Mrs. Jenkins."

Mrs. Salinger's eyes ran over Gladys, taking her in from her hat to her shoes. "How do you do ?" she said in that sweet, cold voice. "I am so glad to have an opportunity of meeting one of Laura's relations. And is this your little son ?"

Gladys gave Harry a push. "Shake hands with the lady, Harry. Go on, now, don't be silly !"

Harry shrank behind her.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Salinger. "No doubt he is shy. And so you have been spending the day with my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Jenkins ?"

"Laura asked us up for Harry's birthday. It seems absurd, really, but this is my first visit to her." Her artificial laugh sounded. "Time does fly so, doesn't it,

Mrs. Salinger? There seems to be no time for anything."

Laura interrupted, hot and uncomfortable. She knew very well that Gladys was showing her worst side. That affected speech, the little squirm she gave, the pinching of her vowels, were all unlike her and displeasing. "We were just going to have tea, Mrs. Salinger. I hope you'll stop?"

"No, thank you, Laura, I think I won't," said Mrs. Salinger. "I am on my way to pay a few calls. And you expect dear Hugh back tomorrow?"

"Yes, he said he'd be in to lunch," Laura answered. "Shall I — would you like me to tell him to come round to see you?"

The blue eyes looked faintly surprised. "Thank you, my dear, but I don't think you need bother," said Mrs. Salinger. "I expect Hugh will come to see me if he wants to." She turned to Gladys. "I am so glad to have had this glimpse of you, Mrs. Jenkins. And now I mustn't interrupt your tea-party any longer. Good-bye. Good-bye, little boy."

Gladys gave her two fingers. "Good-bye. So pleased to have met you."

Laura took her mother-in-law out to the front door.

She waited for a moment after Mrs. Salinger had gone, and then squared her shoulders slightly, and went briskly into the dining-room. In a few minutes she was calling to Harry to come and see the Surprise.

Gladys talked solely of the cake for perhaps five minutes, but then, when silence fell, she said awkwardly: "So that's what your mother-in-law's like!"

Suddenly Laura did not want Gladys to know of Mrs. Salinger's hostility. She said: "Yes, isn't she pretty?"

"Oh, very! That is, I should think she's made-up, isn't she?"

"Lots of people do that," said Laura lightly.

"You never used to hold with it, Laura. However,

I'm not saying anything. I was surprised, though, to hear you call her Mrs. Salinger. I should have thought — "

"Well, I'm not going to call her mother. I've got a mother of my own," said Laura.

"Do you like her, Laura? Honestly, now !"

"Yes," said Laura staunchly. "Very much."

Gladys went on with her tea, thinking that Laura was no longer open with her family.

When Gladys and Harry went home Laura walked slowly back to the drawing-room, and stood for a while looking out of the window at the grey dusk. Presently she sighed and turned rather wearily to the book-shelves that were set in the alcove. She drew out a fat volume, turned on a standard lamp, and disposed herself to study. There was a marker in the book. Laura opened it, propped her head on her hand, and read: "When dealer has bid One Club or One Diamond and second hand has passed, third hand must realize (unless he has quite an unusual holding, or his side has a score) that winning the game with this declaration is most unlikely."

Mrs. Salinger had told Laura that she ought to learn to play Bridge.

Laura sat puzzling over the question of When Third Hand should over-call Dealer's original bid of One, for quite some time. But her mind began presently to wander, and after a while her eyes left the book, and looked into the fire. She began to dream of Hugh's return; it seemed already an age since she had seen him, and the flat was less than ever home when he was out of it. She wished they had not to go out to dinner on the night of his homecoming, but she supposed it was impossible to get out of it. The Crawleys were in town, and had asked them to dinner and the theatre, with dancing and supper afterwards. Laura knew what that would mean. There would probably be just the four

of them for dinner, and that she could cope with, but after the theatre they would go on to the newest dance club, and there it was certain they would be met by other people. Laura had been through it so many times before. She would be paralysed by so many strangers, and make a slip in her speech, or say something that she ought not to say. There would be a cabaret, with girls who wore next to nothing and were, Laura thought, no better than they should be, shamelessly displaying their bodies to the world. She would hate that. She would hate the conversation too, and not know how to join in it. Quillinan said: "Pretend nothing. Take your own line, and stick to it." That was all very well, but it did not work out in practice. She would not soon forget Hugh's anger when she had said that she didn't think cabarets quite nice. She had said it at the very first party she had attended, and her words had evoked startled silence, and some significant glances. And afterwards Hugh had told her For God's sake not to say things like that ! She had tried to stick to it; she had argued, and said: "But I don't think it is nice, Hughie. Those girls aren't respectable. You oughtn't to take me there."

They had quarrelled. Hugh had said things . . . She would not think of that. Later they had made it up, but she could not forget. They had had so many of these quarrels, little flares springing from trivalities. She said things that Hugh did not like, or she made mistakes in her grammar, and a sharp, exasperated note had crept into his voice when he corrected her nowadays. It was as though he were so tired of it, so tired of her mistakes, and her inability to adapt herself to his world.

There had been quite a lot of parties during the last two months. Laura's head ached with them, and with the effort to talk and be gay, and be careful to do the right thing. She had had to give several dinners too. They had not been very successful. The dinners them-

selves were well enough: Mrs. Bower saw to that; Laura had only to look aghast at the housekeeping bills. But after dinner things had not gone well. The guests had nearly always left rather early, and no one had seemed to know what to talk about. Hugh had decided after three of these dismal functions that it would be better in the future to entertain people at restaurants, with a theatre afterwards, so that Laura need not talk. Sometimes his friends accepted these invitations; lately many of them seemed always to have previous engagements.

That was one set. It was composed of what Laura called Society People. They horrified her. There was Lady Barbara Hannersley, whom everyone called Babs. She wore very startling frocks, and smoked innumerable cigarettes. Officially she lived in her parents' house, but she seemed to have a suite in it, and to entertain all her own friends there as if it were a private flat. Men visited her at odd hours; she never seemed to be in bed before four in the morning, and from time to time she did such very queer things that even her own set "talked."

There was a strange, sexless creature who was called Adam by all and sundry, and who spoke in a girlish voice, and was always perfectly dressed. There was a young married couple who were rarely seen together. They were called Meg and Dingo, and they appeared to be very good friends. When Meg, attended by one of her numerous male appendages, met Dingo at some dance club or restaurant, she always waved her hand to him, and very often said: "Hullo, Dingo! I didn't know you were coming here tonight."

And there were several hungry-eyed girls, who had no hesitation in saying that they did not like men. That seemed innocent enough, until you knew. Laura knew now. Hugh had said: "They want smacking. Vicious little beasts." He had had to explain what he meant,

and he had done so with a laugh. Laura could feel her cheeks burn still.

There were others, of course, like the Crawleys, who did not shock one, who were even quite nice, but they were not Laura's friends, and she did not want them to be.

So much for one set. Unhappily it was the set Hugh liked, the amusing, daring, precious set.

Stella Hepplewhite belonged to quite another set. Laura met them at tea with her; they were quite unstartling, but they spoke a language she could not understand.

Hylda knew only earnest young women with missions to perform; Joyce belonged definitely to the daring set; Mrs. Salinger liked people who could play Bridge; Quillinan knew everybody, but his intimates seemed to be quiet, unassuming men like himself, who wore baggy clothes, and smoked pipes all day long. Laura liked them, but Hugh did not. Hugh said that they were worthy, serious-minded people, and that they soon bored him.

Last there was the Art Set, a weird collection of persons who talked a kind of gibberish, and behaved like people on the stage. There were long-haired emulators of the Russian School of Literature; there was an alarming young man who painted pictures, and was apt to rush suddenly from the room with the cry of a lost soul because someone had said something with which he did not agree. If he painted a picture of a man he splashed bits of the man all over his canvas; an eye in one corner, a collar in the middle, a hand somewhere else, and so on. He had a reason for this, but Laura had never been able to understand it. He seemed to be glad of that. He said threateningly: "Don't imagine you can understand! You haven't the soul to appreciate my work."

Laura had told Hugh that to be spoken to like that

she would not, and if Mr. Merrivale couldn't be civil she'd thank him not to come to their flat. Hugh only laughed and said that no one minded what Merrivale said.

"Well, I do mind," said Laura hotly. "I'll put up with a lot, Hugh, but I won't have people coming here to be rude to me."

"My dear girl, that's his pose. He's rude to everyone."

"Then all I can say is I won't have it in my house. What do you want with a person like him, Hugh? He's cracked — clean cracked!"

"He amuses me," said Hugh.

"Well, he doesn't amuse me. Now don't say I shall get used to him, because I shan't do anything of the sort."

"I don't think you need worry," said Hugh. "You didn't do much to make him want to come a second time."

"No, and I didn't mean to," Laura said stubbornly.

Hugh raised his eyes from his book just long enough for her to see the weary, exasperated look in them, and then lowered them again.

She had twisted her hands together. "Must you have him and his lot for friends, Hughie?" she asked, subdued.

"It seems as though I shan't be able to," he replied, and turned a page of his book.

"If you want them so much I'll try and put up with them," she faltered.

But she found that this was not necessary. Hugh did not ask them to the flat again. Instead he went to see them by himself.

CHAPTER XVII

HUGH came back in time not for lunch, as Laura had hoped, but for tea. Laura was watching from the window and when she saw the Bentley swing round the corner of the street her heart gave a great bound, and all at once the grey day became full of sunlight, and she realized that a bird was singing in the plane-tree over the road.

She had the front door open for Hugh; she stood waiting for him, flushed and eager. He came lightly up the shallow stairs, whistling to himself.

"Hughie !"

Her arms were held out to him; happiness looked out of her eyes.

"Hullo, darling !" He put an arm round her shoulders, and kissed her. "Waiting for me ?"

"All day," she said, smiling tremulously.

"Silly girl !" He laughed at her, then kissed her again. "Where's Bower ? He might bring up my things." He put Laura gently from him, and called for Bower. "Oh Bower, just bring up my suitcase, and the other things, will you ? They're in the car. Tea ready, Laura ?"

They went into the drawing-room; Laura began to make the tea. "Did you have a nice time, Hughie ?"

"Yes, splendid. Stella was there." His face softened. He thought back on that halcyon day. Stella and he had kept together. By Jove, Stella could ride ! They had had a great run too, and afterwards, in the dusk, he and Stella had hacked back along the shadowy lanes, talking of — he could not remember what they had talked about, but it had been very pleasant, and he had enjoyed that easy companionship. Stella and he

had always hit it off well, he thought. "Pity you don't ride, Laura," he said absently.

"I'd be afraid to," she said. She raised her eyes. "I expect Stella rides awfully well, doesn't she ?"

"Rather !" Hugh said. He took his cup and saucer from Laura. "I didn't realize how much I'd missed hunting till I went out yesterday. I think next winter I must have two or three hunters. I could stable them up in Leicestershire. . ." He mused in silence for a while.

"I should have liked to have seen you all setting out," said Laura. "The Meet, I mean."

"You must come and see it some time," Hugh said. "The Hopes would be very glad to have you." It was carelessly said, but the very saying of it made him realize that if Laura had been of that house-party it would have been spoiled for him. This was the first time he had been away from her; he had expected to miss her, and he had not missed her at all. More than that, he had felt as though released from bondage. He had been one of a delightful party, intimate with them all, unstrained, not keeping one eye on a wife who might at any moment look to him for guidance, or do something awkward. For two days he had been quite care-free, and it had been so pleasant, such a relief, coming after weeks of strain, that he had not wanted to return to London. And now, having said that one day she must come too, he knew that if she did it would all be spoiled, and not only would he have the worry of her deportment, but that her presence would put a constraint on the entire party. People would try to make conversation for Laura, and he would find himself outside that intimate group, because he stood linked to her.

He was dismayed at himself, and he tried to put such thoughts out of his mind. He began to tell Laura of the day's run.

She listened painstakingly, but his enthusiastic recital was interrupted by such questions as "What is that ?"

— "But aren't you all huntsmen ?" The tale halted; she was not really interested. He stopped talking about the hunt, and a silence fell while he sought in his mind for something they could talk about with mutual interest.

Laura broke the slience. "I had Gladys and Harry up yesterday," she said. "It was Harry's birthday, and we all went to the Zoo. I thought you wouldn't mind. Harry hadn't ever been before, so you can guess how he enjoyed it. Then when we came back for tea your mother looked in."

Hugh looked up quickly. "Mater ?"

"Yes." Laura poured out more tea. "Just for a minute."

Hugh opened his mouth and shut it again. He wanted to say, Damn ! but obviously he could not.

"And whatever do you think ?" Laura continued. "The evening before who should come along but Maurice ! He took me to dinner and the theatre, Hughie. Wasn't it good of him ? I did enjoy myself."

"Oh yes !" said Hugh. "I remember he told me he was going to. What did you see ?"

"Such a pretty play !" Laura said. "'*Miss Muffit.*' It was sweet."

"*Miss Muffit ?*" said Hugh. "Rather you than I. Lots of mawkish sentiment, I suppose ?"

"I don't know whether you'd call it mawkish," Laura answered. "I liked it. It made me cry."

"What on earth possessed Quillinan to choose it ?" wondered Hugh.

"I think he chose it because he knew I'd like it," Laura said humbly. She did not tell him that it had been a blessed relief to go to a play that was not designed to educate her taste.

"Are we doing anything tonight ?" Hugh asked, bored with the subject.

He saw his mother two days later. Mrs. Salinger had

just said good-bye to the last of her Bridge-guests when he came in, and she welcomed him with a fluttering kiss, and cooing speech. "Darling, how lovely to see you. Such a long time since you've been here."

"Thought I'd look in on my way home," Hugh said. "You look very nice, mater."

"Do I, Hugo ?" Mrs. Salinger cooed more than ever. "It is a pretty frock, but I shall really have to leave Celeste. The odious creature has started dunning me. Too horrible, Hugo."

He laughed. "Order another frock," he recommended. "That's what you always used to do, isn't it ?"

"Hugo darling, you're laughing at me. Unkind boy ! Have you had tea, dearest ? Oh, it is nearly six ! Let's sit in front of the fire and talk. Oh, and ring the bell, and then we can have a cocktail." Her hand rested lightly on his arm. "It's such ages since I've had you to myself, darling. And how did you enjoy your holiday ?"

Hugh told her all about his stay with the Hopes. At the end of it Mrs. Salinger meditatively ate the cherry in her cocktail and said: "I called to see Laura while you were away. I expect she told you."

"Very good of you, mater." Hugh tried to shy away from this dangerous subject. "I met your friend Mrs. Carruthers today."

"Did you, dear ? Yes, I called to see Laura, and found that she had a little tea-party. Her sister, a Mrs. — is it Jenkins ? Ah yes, I thought it was. Mrs. Jenkins, and her little boy."

"Yes," said Hugh. He thought it best to be brazen. "That would be Gladys."

Mrs. Salinger winced quite unmistakably. "Gladys," she repeated. "Such a dreadful name, don't you think ? A very respectable young woman, I expect, but you know, Hugo, I could not help being glad it was only

I who happened to call while she was there. You won't mind my saying that, dear one ?"

Hugh muttered something unintelligible, and bent forward to poke the fire. The leaping flames showed Mrs. Salinger his face, rather set, slightly frowning.

"Hugo dear, I wonder if you have ever thought that it might be wiser to separate dear Laura from her family ? It sounds rather dreadful, I suppose, but really, Hugo, that sister is quite, quite impossible."

"I can't," Hugh said curtly.

Mrs. Salinger applied balm. "Laura herself is quite different, of course. You mustn't think that I am criticizing her. But the sister — oh, my dearest, that dreadful common voice ! If anyone had called while she was there ! I think Laura must not ask her to your flat. I am just a little bit surprised that she should have done so."

Hugh got up. "Mater, I know — but I can't talk about it."

The large eyes widened mournfully. "To your mother, Hugo ? Must you shut me out ?"

"I'm sorry, mater," he said jerkily. "But you must see that it's impossible. I can't discuss the thing: it's not fair to Laura."

She rose, and laid her white hands on his sleeve. "Hugo dear, it seems as though you have grown away from me," she said pathetically.

He looked down at her, rather white about the mouth, but said nothing.

"Ever since you came home from Italy, darling, you have seemed — how shall I put it ? — outside."

Speech forced itself from him. He put her hands away from him. "I am outside," he said, in a strange, hard voice. He laughed harshly. "You've put your finger on it with wonderful acuteness, mater. I am outside." Again he laughed. "I must be getting home," he said, and bent to kiss her. "Good-bye, mater. Love to Joyce."

He was gone almost before she could speak.

He and Laura were dining alone tonight, for the first time in many nights. Hugh came in to find Laura waiting for him. It struck him that that was her life now. Other women had their own interests, their own friends. Laura had none. She was never out when he came in; she was not invited to tea-parties and Bridge-parties irrespective of her husband. If she went out she went in his wake, and now that the first duty calls had been paid, and shrinkingly returned, he rarely found anyone with her. He wondered whether she was lonely, and pity for her stirred in his heart. He took her in his arms. "Well, madonna ?"

Her eyes lit up. "Why Hughie, you haven't called me that for I don't know how long !" she said. Her lips were warm on his.

He kissed her long and fiercely. He thought she would always arouse in him this hot passion, that leaped up at sight of her beauty and yet left him unsatisfied.

Laura's arms clasped him to her. "Hughie dear !" she whispered.

"Beautiful Laura !"

She drew back her head a little to look into his eyes. "You don't only love me because I'm nice to look at, do you, Hughie ?"

He reassured her, teasing, laughing at her, but his conscience hurt him. "Not going anywhere tonight, are we ? Good !"

"Oh, really 'good' ?" she said. "I've been so looking forward to it ! Just you and me alone, like we were in Italy." She took his face between her hands, and made him turn his head. "Look, Hughie ! You haven't seen."

For a moment he did not know what she meant. Then he laughed. "Good Lord ! Mimosa !"

The room was full of it, showers of golden balls heavy with scent.

"There was a man selling it in the street today. It took me back so — I — I'm afraid I bought all he had, Hughie."

"Extravagant woman!"

"I know. I couldn't resist it. The smell of it — ! If you shut your eyes you can think yourself back in the White House." Her lips trembled, but she smiled. "But it was wicked of me to be so extravagant. 'Specially when the books come to as much as they have done this last week."

"Very cunning," said Hugh, "but I see through it. You're going to badger me to write a cheque."

"Well Hughie — could you?"

"I suppose I shall have no peace till I do," he said, with a mock sigh. "What's the total damage?"

She told him, looking anxious.

"What a lot we must eat!" he remarked. He went to the desk, and drew out his cheque book.

"It's not us, Hughie."

"Oh? You sound very sinister."

"Hughie, I've been meaning to tell you something. I'm afraid you won't be pleased, p'raps."

He swung round in his chair. "I thought you were looking rather guilty. Out with it! What have you done, you wicked woman?"

"I've — I've given the Bowers their notice, Hughie."

The laugh died. "What?"

"Yes, Hughie. I — we had a row, and — and that's that."

"Had a row with your servants?" said Hugh, displeased. "What on earth do you mean?"

"It had to be, Hugh. I couldn't stand such goings on any longer. You're a man, and you don't think of these things, but I've had my eye on that precious couple ever since they came here. They're stealing our food, Hugh."

"Well, I suppose a certain amount of that is bound to happen."

"Not in my house, it isn't," said Laura firmly. "I'm not going to be cheated, and don't you think it. They thought I didn't know, I'll be bound, but I'm up to their tricks."

"Laura, don't use those vulgar expressions. Couldn't you pull Bower up without descending to a row ?"

"No, Hughie, I couldn't. As soon as I started to speak about it Mrs. Bower gave me a piece of her cheek. I've always known they talked about me behind my back — "

"I daresay they talk about me," Hugh interrupted, "but do you suppose I give it a thought ?"

"P'raps not, but I'm not made that way. You're used to grand servants. I'm not. Anyway, Hugh, the instant I interfered with her ladyship — "

"With Mrs. Bower."

"Yes, with her, she started off being impudent. Said she'd always been used to work for *ladies,* and a lot more beside. Well, if you think I'm going to stand that sort of thing, Hugh, you're wrong."

"No. They'll have to go," Hugh said. "How damned unlucky !"

"I'll get another couple just as good," promised Laura. "Don't you worry about it." She took the cheque he held out to her. "Thank you, dear." She hesitated. "Did you remember your tailor's bill, Hughie ?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, that'll have to wait."

"But Hughie, it came ages ago !"

"Tailors don't expect to be paid on the nail."

"I wonder you can bear to have it hanging over your head like that," she said. "Still, if he doesn't expect it, I suppose it's all right. But there's that account at Vincent's, Hugh. The man called again today, and said he'd be glad if you could make it convenient to let

them have a cheque. Very polite he was, but oh Hughie, I didn't know how to look him in the face!"

"What damned cheek of him to come here!" said Hugh wrathfully.

"Well dear, if you owe him money I don't see why he shouldn't try to get it out of you," Laura said. "Do pay him, Hughie. To please me!"

"I can't quite see what it's got to do with you."

"Only that I can't bear being in debt, Hugh. It makes me feel so unsafe, somehow, and so ashamed of living in the lap of luxury when we don't pay our bills. It's such an awful thing to get into debt, Hughie. You don't seem to realize."

"Afraid I don't. Still, I'll pay Vincent's off and never go near the shop again. Where is the blasted bill?"

She gave it him. "While you're at it, Hughie, what about writing a cheque to the motor people for all those things you had done to the car?"

"Where do you think the money's coming from to pay all these things?" demanded Hugh. "Moreover it would be slightly ironic to pay for repairs to the Bentley when I haven't paid all the first bill yet."

"Not — not — you mean to say you haven't paid for the car?" Laura cried. "Then — it isn't really ours!"

"Of course it's ours. I've given them something on account. That's all right. But these other bills must wait over."

"Isn't there any money in the Bank?" Laura asked in a frightened voice.

"At the moment there's an overdraught."

She grew quite pale. "Hughie, what'll happen?"

"Nothing. What should happen?"

"We won't — we won't get broker's men in?" She sent a nervous glance towards the door as though she feared to see one already.

He burst out laughing. "Good God, no! You ridiculous creature! Broker's men! It'll be all right when I get next quarter's allowance. Laura, you silly girl, you're looking scared out of your life!" He held out his hand to her. "Poor darling. Did you think I'd land you in a debtors' prison?"

She paid no heed. "Hughie, that money you put in the Bank for me. Take it back, and pay off all the bills. I've only spent a very little of it. I don't need it. I've got more clothes than I know what to do with. And Hughie — the car! would they — would they take it back? Or — or we could sell that pendant you gave me!"

He got up and came to her, placing a hand over her mouth. "Shut up, dear idiot. Yes, let's sell your frocks, and the hall clock, and my dress coat. Laura, you don't know how funny you are."

She pulled his hand away. "Hughie, it isn't a thing to joke about. You don't seem to see — why, its downright dishonest to buy things you can't pay for!"

"Oh, that'll do, Laura! I shall pay for them in time."

She put her hands to her hot cheeks. "I feel awful about it. What would your mother think of me if she knew I'd let you get into debt?"

"The mater! Good God, she's in debt herself!"

Laura stared at him. "Your mother?"

"Of course she is. Told me today her dressmaker was dunning her. So you see there's nothing to be so tragic about."

"I can't see it like that," Laura said. "I was brought up different." Suddenly she caught at the lapel of his coat. "Hughie, promise me one thing! Whatever you do, don't tell Uncle Charles! I think I just couldn't bear that."

"My dear, he wouldn't be in the least shocked, or even surprised."

"No," said Laura bitterly. "He'd send you a cheque. I tell you I'd rather sell everything we've got than lose all my self-respect like I am doing."

"Did you get that high-souled sentiment out of *Miss Muffit ?*" inquired Hugh.

She looked up at him drearily. "I've made you angry. That's all that ever happens." She winked rather fast and turning away from him fumbled for a handkerchief.

His arms came round her. "Don't be silly, darling. Come, leave these money matters to me. Smile ! You're spoiling our tête-à-tête evening."

Was she weak to smile, to let the matter drop ? She did not know. All she knew was that if she persisted he would grow impatient with her, and then angry, and tell her that she did not understand. She kissed him then, for it had come to this, that she dared not annoy him lest he should cease to care for her.

"Good girl. I must go and have a bath, and change," Hugh said.

After dinner they sat one on either side of the fire, to enjoy, Laura thought, a cosy chat. She spread open the evening paper and ran through the news items. "Awful, this Finchley Murder Case," she remarked.

"Disgusting," said Hugh. "Did I tell you I went today to see Seymour's pictures ?"

"No, did you ? Are they pretty ? I mean, are they good ?"

"Curious. No perspective, but tremendous strength. I particularly liked one nude there was there. He treats flesh in some extraordinary fashion that I can't quite fathom."

"Oh !" said Laura. There was a pause. "Fancy, it says here there's a little boy only seven years old playing the piano in Munich as well as a grown-up man."

"Horrid little beast."

"It does seem queer, doesn't it ? . . . Oh, how

sweet ! He always takes his Teddy Bear on to the stage with him."

Hugh began to fill a pipe. "I heard today that Masterman's got a new play coming on next month at the Royalty. Bright speeches and moral uplift, so he says." He chuckled. "You know the type of thing. Smart repartees that sound hellish clever but mean precisely nothing. Masterman recited several with immense and devilish relish. All for filthy lucre."

"For what ?"

"Fil — money. He used to write dam' good plays, and they saw the light on Sunday afternoons only. So now he places his tongue firmly in his cheek and hands the public what it wants. Dollops of what it wants. It laughs and cries at the humour and pathos, and Masterman is lionized, and goes home to be sick."

"It must be wonderful to write a play, I should think," said Laura.

Another silence fell. Hugh really did not feel that he could reply to this. He wondered how he had contrived not to be bored during those months alone with Laura in Italy. What had they talked about ? Themselves, he thought, just lovers' talk. But you could not always make love, or worship mere beauty. You might drug your intellect for a time but it had to wake again sooner or later.

Laura began to darn one of his socks. She looked placid, even exasperatingly placid. Hugh could not know that she was desperately racking her brain to think of some topic that would interest him. She started to talk of a book she had read, then of the Christmas calendars she had seen in Harrods. He answered, he even asked questions, but she had a sudden chilling knowledge that he was pretending an interest he did not feel. He yawned once, and swung his foot up and down in a way that showed her that he was

bored. It was as though a cold warning hand closed over her heart.

She put away her work, and knelt down on the floor beside Hugh's chair, pretending to make up the fire. She looked up at Hugh, and he smiled at her. In that smile she missed some vital spark. She took his hand in hers, and played with his long fingers, and presently dropped a kiss into his palm. He responded at once; boredom retreated while she woke passion in him.

In her embrace tonight there was something fierce, something primitive, she clung to him as though she would never let him go, and her face when he saw it was almost haggard, with a mouth parted not for bliss but for pain.

"What's the matter, darling ?"

Her closed eyes opened and seemed as though they would search his very soul. She did not answer; she only drew his head down to her shoulder, and held it there, with her fingers wandering through his hair, caressing, lingering.

He gripped her yielding body closer. On a deep broken sigh she whispered: "I love you ! My heart — my life !"

His kisses fell burning on her lips.

She could not sleep that night. A restlessness tossed her from side to side, and a grey ghost peered at her, the ghost of a cold Tomorrow.

She had wooed Hugh this evening, waked love in him, but what kind of love ? She had bored him first, bored his intellect, hard though she had tried to interest him. Then she had deliberately appealed to his sensual side, and it had responded at once, and for tonight driven boredom away. But she had had to woo him, and with the weapons of her sex and her beauty.

She covered her face with her hands. They were

shaking. She thought: "It's nothing. Imagination. Can't expect him always to be talkative. Men do get bored sometimes."

A voice in her brain said: "Fool! What is there in you for him to love but your body? What do you know? What can you talk to him about? Nothing!"

She knew fear then, a fear that numbed her. Her mind seemed to move like a crippled thing. For the first time she deliberately drove it forward, reluctant, limping, to look at the ghost Tomorrow. The lonely ghost held nothing for her in its phantom hands, not love, not happiness which she had thought won for all time. And for Hugh, what? Her shut eyes saw disillusionment, and boredom, perhaps even hatred, and between him and her the crack of a gulf, slowly widening.

Two days later, choosing her moment, she said to him: "Hughie, if ever you found you didn't love me — any more, or — or were growing tired of me, you'd divorce me, wouldn't you?"

He looked up from his book. "What a grim question! No, of course I shouldn't."

She was serious. "I'd want you to, Hughie."

"You? You disapprove of divorce."

"Yes. But — circumstances alter cases," she said slowly.

"Well, you can set your mind at rest," he smiled. "I shan't divorce you. Not that I could."

"Oh but you could do it, couldn't you? I mean, it could be arranged. People do, I'm sure."

"Look here, what are you driving at? Pulling my leg?"

"No. I was only thinking that if ever you — wish you hadn't married me, the only thing to do would be for us to get divorced."

"How morbid!" he said. "I can't quite see what

you're driving at, but you can rest assured we shall never have a divorce."

"Why not, Hughie? Just supposing you didn't love me any more, wouldn't it be better?"

"I can't suppose anything of the sort," Hugh said lightly. "But even if such a thing did happen divorce would be the last thing I should think of."

"Will you tell me why, Hughie? Because of the Prayer Book, and what it says? *Whom God hath joined . . .?*"

"No, not because of that. Salingers don't wash their dirty linen in public, my dear."

"I see. Scandal. But people of your class think nothing of it."

"We do. Haven't you grasped the great creed yet? Thou shalt create no scandal? You'll find it awfully hard to get rid of me, I warn you."

She drew his hand to her cheek. "My dear — ! But do you mean to say if I — well, went off with somebody else, p'raps, you wouldn't divorce me?"

"No, I don't mean that. I should have to then. You'd have already created the scandal."

"But you'd go on being married to me if I only bored you. Or if — if you'd come to hate me?"

"Laura, this is a most unfruitful topic, and I've had enough of it."

"But would you, Hughie?"

"Yes, I should," he answered. "Anything sooner than a public scandal."

"I see," she said.

"And now may we talk of something else?" he asked. "Or do you want me to tell you a few ways of poisoning husbands?"

She laughed. "No, I don't want that," she said.

"Well, what's the meaning of all these grim questions?"

"Oh, no meaning!" she answered. "I only wondered."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN DECEMBER Lady Powis and her brother came to London. Except when she and Hugh had run down to Alleyne for a week-end Laura had not seen them since she had lived in the flat. Lady Powis came to call on her shortly after her arrival, for which courtesy Laura tried hard to feel grateful. Lady Powis was as uncompromising as ever. She at once said that she did not admire the flat, which she considered futuristic. When the newly imported parlour maid — Laura had determined never to have another married couple — brought in the tea, she remarked that the girl was badly trained. Laura wilted.

Having disposed of the flat and the parlour maid, Lady Powis wished to know what Laura did with herself all day. It was hard to answer that. Laura said: "I have the shopping in the morning, and — and in the afternoon I go for a walk, or perhaps do some sewing. And sometimes Hugh takes me somewhere, or I have to go out to tea."

Lady Powis said severely that idleness was good for no one, and mentioned various charitable institutions in which Laura might well interest herself. She said she was on the Ladies' Committee of a hospital, and had much to do with certain Welfare Centres. After Christmas, she said, she must see about introducing Laura into them. Her sharp eyes observed a certain listlessness in Laura, a forlornness of attitude. She said unexpectedly: "I trust Hugh is not neglecting you ?"

A startled look answered her before Laura's lips framed another, different answer. The spoken reply

was too urgent. Laura said: "Oh no, no! How could you think such a thing, Lady Powis?" A woman who had no cause to complain of neglect would have been more likely to have laughed, seeing a jest in the question. Laura, with lonely days behind her, was too anxious to defend Hugh, too anxious that no one should know that her company no longer charmed him.

"Well, what does Hugh do with himself?" Lady Powis said, putting that first question aside.

Laura could not tell her. What did Hugh do? He was rarely at home. She thought his Club claimed a good deal of his time, and he was compiling a new book of poems. He was hunting fairly regularly too, and he always seemed to have a multitude of friends to visit.

Lady Powis said: "I hoped you would influence Hugh to take an interest in more serious matters. His uncle and I have been thinking that it is a pity he does not wish to take up politics."

This sounded sinister. When Hugh heard of it, he only laughed, and said that in the old days Lady Powis had always badgered Roland to stand for Parliament.

Laura and Hugh dined at Eaton Place next day, two of a large gathering. James Powis took Laura in to dinner, and after an attempt to talk to her of archæological remains found in Crete, relapsed into shy silence. Her other neighbour had Joyce beside him, and was turned half away from Laura throughout the meal. Laura made spasmodic remarks to James, which he dealt with in the same spirit, and wondered when the interminable dinner would come to an end.

After dinner the party split naturally into groups. Two tables were set out for Bridge, and Lady Powis bore down upon Laura with the intelligence that she was wanted to make up a four.

"I play so badly," Laura said, terrified. "I've only played such a very little. Need I?"

"The only way to learn is by practice," said Lady

Powis. "Don't be nervous. I will put you at Emmeline's table."

Laura spent the rest of the evening apologizing for her mistakes.

They were invited to spend Christmas day in Eaton Place, but a worse fate befell. Hugh said there was a limit to what he could stand, and elected to accept another invitation, which was to join a house-party at the Hopes' house in Leicestershire.

They arrived in time for a late tea, and found most of the party assembled in the big hall. Laura had an instant's impression of riding boots, and stout tweeds. Their hostess came forward to greet them. It was Laura's first meeting with her. She seemed a pleasant woman, of uncertain age, with a weather-beaten complexion, and a loud, cheerful voice. She took Laura to her room, hoped briskly that she would find everything she wanted there, and told her, with a jolly laugh, that if she didn't she must just ring the bell. Then she said she knew Laura would want to wash after the journey, and was sure she would be able to find her way downstairs again alone.

This meant that Laura must make her entry unsupported. She came nervously down the wide stairs, and tried to locate Hugh. He was standing by the fire, talking to three other men, and did not see her. Very often nowadays, he did not see her. Perhaps he was tired of piloting her through such gatherings as these. She crossed the hall, feeling herself a stranger pitchforked into a circle of intimates.

Mrs. Hope saw her. "Here you are! George, here is Mrs. Hugh. My husband, Mrs. Hugh. Give her something to eat, George. Is there a chair anywhere? Do sit down, my dear. I don't think you know Major Lawrence?"

Tea and crumpets were thrust upon Laura. She tried to hold both saucer and plate in one hand to be able

to give the other to Major Lawrence, and only succeeded in dropping the crumpet. She blushed scarlet, and said: "Oh, I'm so sorry !"

However, nobody appeared to mind. A fresh crumpet was brought her, and Mrs. Hope said: "Do someone find her a table. It is ridiculous that there are no tables in this house. Bill, ring the bell. I want some more hot water."

"Are you fond of huntin', Mrs. Salinger ?" inquired Major Lawrence, after profound thought.

"No. That is, I don't ride," Laura said.

"Don't ride ? Tut, tut ! Daresay you shoot ?"

"No," said Laura.

"Glad to hear it. Never feel safe when a woman's out," he told her. "Never know what she'll do. Went out once with one. Confounded woman placed next me, and kept on falling back out of the line. Could feel shot in my back at any moment. Not good enough. Told her to keep up. Wouldn't, so I had to fall back. Devilish dangerous proceeding. Spoiled the whole day. Birds came over. So taken up with keeping an eye on the woman, missed as pretty a shot — Play Bridge at all ?"

"A little. I'm not very good at it." Laura felt bewildered by this unintelligible speech. She heard her name, and turned to find a tall man standing before her, who said that he must introduce himself to her. It appeared that he was a friend of the family.

When she went to bed that night she felt worn out with the effort to keep up with all these people. Her hostess had said that everybody did as they pleased in her house, but in practice this hardly worked out. Plans were made for almost every moment of the day, and so determined a spirit of Christmas gaiety prevailed, that no one seemed satisfied unless they were definitely "doing" something. Laura was swept into a roulette group after dinner. She did not approve of gambling,

but she had learned not to say this. She did not know what she was supposed to do, but she copied her neighbour, and diffidently pushed modest counters on to the numbers he selected.

Later, the clever woman of the party suggested a paper-game, and by sheer insistence collected most of the party into an unwilling group, and supplied them with pencils and slips of paper. To Laura's dismay she found that she was expected, in the space of five minutes, to write down a Famous Soldier, an Infamous Woman, a Battle, an Underground Station, and various other equally impossible things all beginning with B. When the five minutes were over everyone read what they had written, and hot controversy raged. Laura never had more than four answers, and she wished that she were dead.

Happily Hugh who, knowing how impossible it would be for Laura to play this game, had strenuously opposed it, managed to rescue her. He bore her off to play snooker, and that was fun, Laura thought. She had to be shown how to hold her cue, and she had to be told where and how to aim, but that did not humiliate her, as neither of the other two women seemed capable of playing without a great deal of advice from everyone.

Christmas Eve was rather worse. Laura hid herself in her bedroom as often as she could, but after dinner, she had to join in a game of Charades. The Charades were all rather clever, and provoked the maximum amount of argument and laughter. Laura found herself an unwanted super. She stood on the outskirts of a hotly arguing group, and smiled determinedly to show that she did not feel "out of it." She made self-conscious attempts to dress-up, and when she was allotted a part she asked what she was to say, and said it without the smallest addition of her own. Everyone was very polite to her, and people made a point of asking what

she thought, or what she suggested. She could only say: "Oh, I think it'll be very good like that," and watch with an aching heart the quick frown on Hugh's face.

When their stay came to an end she felt battered, and so miserable that she could have cried. It did not matter whether people were quiet and ceremonious, like Lady Powis, or whether they were noisy and go-as-you-please, like the Hopes. She could not fit in. She could not throw herself into their party. The more she tried, the more artificial and dull she seemed to grow.

"A very exhausting week," said Hugh. "The worst of these Christmas gatherings is that people won't leave one alone. I think we won't repeat the experiment."

Life dragged on for another month, with only one incident to mark its progress. Hugh, striving desperately with a kind of shut-teeth doggedness, to keep up with all his friends, gave a cocktail-party at the flat, and induced a fair number of people to come. In the middle of this party May Burton walked in, assertive, giggling, bold, Laura thought, as brass.

Had it been possible Laura would have stopped her from entering. It was not possible. The parlour maid ushered May in, and nothing could be done.

"Hullo, Laura !" said May loudly. "Thought I'd pop in to see you. Hope I'm not in the way or anything."

With one startled, frightened glance at Hugh, Laura went forward to meet May. She spoke to her in a low, halting voice, and tried to get her to sit down in the background. This May was not at all inclined to do. May waved to Hugh, and said: "I do seem to have dropped in on a party. Good afternoon, Mr. Salinger. Quite a stranger, aren't you ?"

Hugh brought her a cocktail. His lips smiled grimly. "How do you do ? Won't you sit down ? Do you like Bronx or Martini ?"

May's eyes stared boldly round. "I'm sure I've no

choice," she said, and accepted the little glass. "Cheerio everybody," she said. She looked under her lashes at Laura. "Well, Laura, you're not falling over yourself to introduce me, are you ?"

Laura felt that she could happily have strangled her. It was quite obvious that May meant to make as much trouble as she could. She had confidently expected to move amongst Laura's new friends, and when she had seen that this was not to be she had grown steadily more hostile whenever she had met her sister.

"You sit down," Laura said under her breath. "What are you talking in that silly way for ?"

"What a loving sister, I *don't* think !" said May shrilly.

A large figure moved across the room, and came to stand beside May, shutting her out from the curious, surprised eyes upon her. "Is this Miss Burton ?" Quillinan said. "My name's Quillinan. How nice to meet you !"

May was instantly diverted. She bridled, and gave Quillinan a limp hand somewhere on a level with her chin. "Oh yes ! Charmed to make your acquaintance, I'm sure."

"I had the pleasure of meeting your mother not so very long ago," Quillinan said, "I wonder if we can find somewhere to sit down ? Yes, there's a place." He bore May off to the end of the room, ensconced her on a sofa, and sat himself down beside her.

Laura thought that no one could ever have a truer friend than Maurice Quillinan.

May was not allowed to escape, but in a very short time the party broke up. Conversation, which had been snapped off in mid-air by May's arrival, was resumed again, but rather lamely. People began to go. When the last invited guest had left Maurice announced that he was going to escort May to the tube-station. May had forgotten her spite in this exciting conquest, and

went off quite gaily, ogling Quillinan over her shoulder.

The storm burst over Laura's head. "That ends it!" Hugh said. "Understand me, Laura, you must tell your family once and for all that they are not to come here. It's positively damnable that I should have to say this to you. I should have thought you'd have seen for yourself that the intimacy has got to stop. It's bad enough when my mother arrives to find your sister Gladys here, but when it comes to May forcing herself into one of our parties — "

"I'm sorry! she shouldn't have — I know, Hughie, and I was as angry as you are. She won't do it again. Mother and Gladys wouldn't have dreamed of dropping in like that. Don't ask me to give them up! Don't do that, Hughie!"

"Laura, you may as well face it now as later. You cannot keep up with your family and be my wife. I daresay that sounds snobbish and hard, but you must consider me a little. Go and see your people if you must, but make them understand that they are not to come here."

"Hughie, how can I? You don't see how impossible — "

"I don't care what you say to them, but you must stop them coming here. You can put it all on to me, if you like."

"Tell them you won't know them? Hughie, do you think I'd give you away like that?" She caught her breath. "I couldn't do it. You can't have thought! How can I tell Mother and Dad that I'll be so condescending as to go and see them but that I'd be ashamed to have them to my own house?"

"Then drop them altogether!" said Hugh savagely. "If they've any sense they'll see that it must be so."

She fell back. "Drop them. . . Must I do that, Hugh? Oh no, no, you don't mean that!"

"Either that, or come to a proper understanding with them. No, don't look at me like that. I wouldn't say this if it weren't necessary. Good God!" he cried bitterly. "Isn't it difficult enough as it is? Do you want to make the whole thing utterly impossible?"

Her hands shook; she was looking at him with dread in her eyes. "All right. Yes. I see. I'll do something. I promise I will. Don't say any more. Don't, don't — I'll speak to Mother. Only forgive me! forgive me, Hughie!"

He was softened at once. "It's not your fault. What have I to forgive?"

"Forgive me for making life — so hard for you," she said in a low voice.

What she said to her mother he never knew. She never spoke of it again, never told him that she had let her family think her grown into a snob. She would not let them see her unhappiness, because that must reflect on Hugh. She took it all on her own shoulders, and acted a part that she knew was convincing. She talked of her new life as though she were in love with it; she interlarded her conversation with titled names; she expatiated on all the amusing parties she went to, and all the plans she and Hugh had made for the season. When she left Brixton she knew that intercourse with the Burtons was at an end. They did not reproach her; to them it was natural that she should want to throw off the old ties. Had they known the real facts they would have been miserable for her sake, but since they believed her radiantly happy they would be content to let her go her way, and think of her with regret that was not unmixed with pride.

She was fighting now, fighting hard to keep Hugh's love. Daily she felt that she lost ground. She would make any sacrifice for him, even to the tearing out of her heart, but were these sacrifices of any use? The gulf was growing wider, not all her efforts could close

it, while the bridge she had thrown across grew daily weaker.

Hugh was not happy. He might pretend, but he could not deceive her. Love was not enough, and even love was dying. She could woo him to moments of bliss, but when humdrum life succeeded these, did he love her then? He wanted friends, and the life he had always known; he wanted a wife who could enter into his interests, talk to his friends, and be to him not a drag, but a social asset.

She began to think that perhaps from the very first she had cheated herself. He had never loved her as she understood love. Surely, surely real love endured, and was not hurt by difficulties. She had difficulties to face greater than any Hugh had; they did not make her love him less.

If she had withstood him, that night at Nice, he would have forgotten her, just as she had prophesied. But instead she had been weak, so weak that she had given way to her own need and married Hugh, and thereby spoiled his life.

She had thought to become all that he required; she knew that she would never become it. She might learn correct deportment, slowly she was already learning it, but not all the effort in the world would turn her into a well-educated, conversable woman. His friends thought her dull and ignorant. Gradually, Hugh was beginning to think so too.

And there was Stella. Perhaps, if he had never met her, Hugh would have married Stella. Laura felt that this must have been so. Stella cared for Hugh. She could not hide that from eyes so jealously keen as Laura's. For Hugh's sake she was kind to his wife. She cared in a way that Laura could understand, selflessly, desiring only that which was best for Hugh. He did not love her now: Laura was sure of that. She was his very good friend, even, in some vague way, she was

necessary to him, but love, the love he had given to Laura, played no part in their relationship. That was Stella's doing, Laura thought. She held Hugh at arm's length, seeing, because she loved, a looming danger. Something primitive in Laura rose up at the thought of Stella and hated her. Stella had come to see her only a week ago, and Hugh had been at home, yawning over the fire. Laura had seen his eyes light up as Stella came in, and more than anything she wanted to fasten her fingers round that slim, white throat, and choke the life from Stella.

And they had talked, those two, as dear friends talk. It was not Stella's fault that Laura had sat apart; she had tried to draw her into the charmed circle; she would not let Hugh talk of experiences only he and she had shared. Always it was as though she dragged Laura between them, to remind Hugh. . .

"The great thing about Stella," said Hugh, "is that she understands you when you speak."

Good hearing that, for a wife who had not that quality.

But there was nothing to be feared from Stella. There was no need to fight her as she fought the other circumstances of her life. Stella had stepped back when Hugh married; she would never be a wrecking third in their lives. Breeding came to her aid, cool self-possession which Laura so hungrily envied her; she was able to meet Hugh as though she had never thought to be anything to him but a childhood's friend. Laura knew that she herself could not have done that.

She thought if she had had to fight Stella for possession of Hugh she would have hated her less.

She wondered whether Stella shared this hatred. No sign of it looked out of those inscrutable blue eyes. Yet she must hate Hugh's wife, for having stolen him from her, for having spoiled his life.

Laura became aware of her tears, rolling down her

cheeks and dropping on to her clasped hands. It did not seem as though she could stop them. She felt as though her heart were an inexhaustible well of tears. She cried silently, immobile. No sobs shook her, none of the little moans of grief that women make, no liquid sniffs, no dabbing at her eyes. Her hands never moved; only the slow tears fell, and her mouth hanging a little open, twisted with the pain of them.

Stella found her like that. Laura had not heard her come in; she did not move. Stella paused upon the threshold, uncertain whether to go or stay. The fixed eyes stared unseeingly into the fire. Unseeingly? Stella thought they saw ghosts.

She moved softly forward. "Laura?"

Laura looked up, not with a start, but as though she woke from some deep abstraction. She regarded Stella for a moment in a considering, wondering manner, then she put up her hand to her cheek, as though dazed, and felt the tears there. "Stella!" She looked at her hand, wet with tears, and then at Stella again. "I didn't hear you," she said mechanically. She got up. "I don't know how — won't you sit down?"

Stella put out her hand. "I didn't mean to startle you. The door was open, and I just walked in."

"I expect the girl has gone to the post," said Laura. She took out her handkerchief. "You must excuse me."

"Laura, is there anything the matter? Anything I can do? You've had bad news?"

"No," said Laura. "Won't you sit down?"

Stella went slowly to the fire, and began to pull off her gloves. "I don't want to pry into your affairs, but — you are unhappy, and alone. . ."

"Yes, alone," Laura said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I meant, at this moment," Stella said, in a troubled voice. "That was why I stayed. In case I could help

you in any way, or at least keep you company."

"That's very kind of you," Laura said. "I don't think you and I can ever help each other — not that way."

"I should be only too glad if I could, Laura."

"Would you?" Laura looked curiously at her. "That's queer. I can't understand that."

Stella's eyes did not waver. "Why not?"

"I don't know," Laura said. "I wouldn't help you. No, I wouldn't want to do that. And yet we're sort of held together, both of us loving him, neither of us possessing him. Me perhaps never. You — not yet."

Stella moved a step towards her. "Laura, you don't know what you are saying. Sit down a little while. You're not yourself."

"No, I'm not," Laura said. "I wouldn't dare speak out if I were. But somehow it seems as though I've got past all that, caring what's good manners, caring what you'll think of me. You're clever at hiding your feelings; I'm not. I don't know what you're feeling now. Hating me, I daresay."

"No, please, please — !"

"I'm being bad form, aren't I? Showing my class. It doesn't seem to matter. I've been thinking that when you get down to bedrock class doesn't count any longer." She looked musingly at Stella. "So you don't hate me. I don't know that I believe that. But it doesn't make much odds."

"Why should I hate you?" Stella said stupidly.

"I took what should have been yours. That's partly why."

Stella coloured deeply. "Must you say these things, Laura? Hugh never loved me."

"No. But you love him, don't you? You can't hide that from me."

"Laura, I can't talk of such things," Stella said in a stifled voice.

"It isn't done, is it? All right, say you don't. What does it matter? But I tell you we're held together, you and I, by that. I'm not blaming you. You've behaved perfectly. Oh yes, I've got sense to see that."

"Please stop! Can't you feel how dreadful this is to me? Laura, you're overwrought! Must you accuse me of caring for a man who doesn't care for me?"

"Don't you?" Laura smiled rather crookedly. "You don't tell lies, Stella."

Stella stared at her hand, opened and shut the slim fingers. "There has never been anything between Hugh and me but friendship. If I ever cared in another way, if I cared now, there would still be nothing. Hugh is all yours."

"Mine! Did you ever think that? After you'd seen me, realized what I was? You loved him and could know so little about him? No, I don't believe that. You were like the rest, like his mother, like Joyce. You thought 'It can't last.' P'raps you were sorry for me. Yes, yes, you are sorry for me. You're kind, just. You tried to make a friend of me, tried to teach me things. That's beyond me. I don't know. P'raps you thought I could make him happy. I can understand you helping me if that was the way it was. But when you knew me better, then you must have seen — because you cared for him. If you care for a person, you know, you feel things." She put her hand to her breast. "I can't explain how it is. Well, I don't need to. You understand that. You said, why should you hate me? Because you know I haven't got it in me to make Hugh happy. That's why."

"Something has happened to make you say such things. Hugh loves you. You have been letting the outside things worry you. Laura, it is an impertinence in me to advise you, but why do you struggle to get on in Hugh's set? They aren't worth it. They aren't

even good for him. I can guess what you've been through. Why go on? This is very difficult to say: I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"Go on. I haven't got many feelings left," Laura said.

"It's worn you out. You won't be able to mix with all these people. I don't think it's a question of class, though perhaps that counts too. It is what you've been brought up to. They aren't your sort. You can't talk to them, or be interested in their subjects. I have thought that from the start. Wouldn't things be easier for you both if you gave up the struggle? It frets you, it frets Hugh. I have thought you might be so happy in the country together, or perhaps in your dear Italy — away from people who don't understand." She stopped, her speech checked by the look on Laura's face.

"Do you think I haven't longed for that? To go back where we were happy! Our house of dreams, we called it. It was that — for a time." She shook her head slowly. "No. You haven't understood. The people who've looked down on me, the struggle I've had — they've made everything worse, but they wouldn't have mattered. Not if I'd been able to hold Hugh. Do you know what would happen if we was to go back? You don't say. Well, I'll tell you, but you do know. Hugh would be bored."

"Dear Laura, if he wasn't bored before — " Stella began gently.

"But he was," Laura said. "Even before we left he'd begun to get tired of being with me alone. Oh, we pretended, but I knew — I knew when I saw him so happy to be amongst his friends again, that he had been bored, just a little."

Stella was silent, gazing into the heart of the fire. A glowing ember fell out on to the hearthstones and slowly faded to a dingy grey. There was no comfort

she could give. Better perhaps than Laura she knew that Hugh could never be content to live apart from his world, tied to a woman whose body alone he loved.

"Yes, you do see," Laura said. She moved to a chair beside the fire, and sat down in it as though she were very tired, resting her head in her hand.

"What can I say?" Stella asked. "Why have you told me this? Me, of all people?"

"I don't know. You came in just then, when I wasn't myself, like you said. It seemed as if I couldn't help but say it. I'd no right to, I expect. Well, I know I hadn't. But you and I — there's that link holding us both. Behind all that hate in me there's something else, deeper, I daresay. Like as if I was holding hands with you — I can't explain. Because you want his happiness, and I want it too. That's where we join: you, a Miss Hepplewhite, and me, plain Laura Burton. But that isn't really an excuse. You'd think I'd have learned better than to blurt out my troubles to a stranger."

Stella looked pitifully down at her, so lonely and friendless in these alien surroundings. "You have said yourself we are not strangers, Laura."

Laura did not raise her eyes. "You've felt it too, have you?"

"I think so. It must have been that." Awkwardly she touched Laura's shoulder. "I didn't let myself think about it. But oh, believe me, I don't hate you! I would like to be friends with you, if you would let me."

Laura smiled. "You can afford not to hate me," she said. "I believe you all right."

"Afford . . . I don't understand."

"No? Well, p'raps if I were the winner I wouldn't hate you."

Stella's hand dropped to her side. "You mustn't say that. It isn't true, Laura. I am nothing to Hugh."

"No, not yet. I ought to thank you for not stealing him."

"Laura, don't say that! Oh, this is impossible! Are you mad to talk in this way? You, his wife, and I — only his friend — to discuss — it's like a nightmare! I could never take Hugh from you."

Laura sighed. "No. Never mind." She straightened herself. "You're right: I've no business to talk like I have done. I don't seem to myself to be quite right in the head to have done such a thing." She got up again, and stood close to Stella, taller by half a head. "You'll forget it, won't you? You'll have to."

"How can I?" Stella said, covering her face with her hands.

"Well, p'raps not. But you'll never speak of it. Never let on I told you — things about Hugh and me."

"Oh, never! never!"

"You'll promise that? Whatever happened? You'd never let on you knew things weren't — all they might have been between Hugh and me?"

"Why do you ask that? Can't you trust me not to — betray your confidence?"

"It seems I'll have to. I think you won't, because of Hugh. That's our bond, to keep unhappiness away from him."

"I shall never say a word of what has passed between us today. Oh, we must put it behind us! You are making me — like an accomplice. Why have you done it? Why must I share a secret with you? You've dragged me in, and I never wanted to be a third in your life."

"P'raps because you love Hugh too," Laura said. Her gaze seemed to probe a mystery; she was faintly frowning. "Because you'd have known without my telling. It makes one sort of — able to see everything, love does. No, you didn't want to share a secret with me, but you aren't the sort to shirk things. You must share it; I

must be sure of you. Don't cry. I'm talking in a silly way, I expect. You wouldn't ever forget that what held us two was just the only thing in life that matters to you and me, Hugh's happiness? No, of course you wouldn't."

Stella's soft tears fell through her sheltering fingers. "Oh, do you know so much then?" she whispered.

"No, so little," Laura said sadly. "But it doesn't take brain to know about love."

Stella's hands left her face. She had stopped crying. She dried her eyes, catching her breath once or twice on a sob. "I must go. We leave town next week. I won't come here again. It's better like that, isn't it? Yes, we mustn't meet so often. Now that this — this conversation lies between us. You've made me say what I meant never to say to anyone. I needn't ask you also to — forget?"

"No, you needn't ask that," Laura said.

CHAPTER XIX

SHE WAS afterwards amazed at herself for having said so much, and could appreciate Stella's discomfort. She smiled rather wryly at that; she could have no pity for Stella. Stella had all the unhappiness of seeing the man she loved tied to another woman, but the future held comfort for her, perhaps fulfilment of her desires. Laura hardly speculated on that. She found herself thinking: "When I am gone . . ." She paused there, wondering. How long that thought had lurked in her brain she did not know, but it was certainly there. Hugh's marriage seemed to her, his wife, a temporary, transitory affair. She thought dreamily that from the beginning she had known vague forebodings of ill. Had disaster come? She thought not. She would not, in this mood of dispassionate criticism, exaggerate the ill that had befallen. If Hugh, when the last shreds of his love for her died, loved elsewhere, that would be disaster. But it had not yet come to that; probably it would not come to that for quite some time. All that had happened was the waning of love, and with it, the insidious growth of disillusionment.

Hugh was kind to her still, in spite of his frequent flashes of impatience, but he could not cheat her. She was sensitive to his every mood; it was as though her heart beat in time with his. She knew beyond all power of mistaking that his kindness sprang more from pity for her than from love. She knew that if she were to die now he would soon be not only consoled, but far happier than if she had lived. That he would be sorry

she did not doubt; he would even feel pain. He might for a short time fancy himself inconsolable. But that would not be real emotion. He would pick up the threads of his life where she had broken them, and life would go on for him, a free life, with happiness in store. Laura would be soon forgotten; his brief marriage would become in retrospect like a bitter-sweet dream that had not affected his waking self.

The cold hand on her heart was turning to ice; almost it numbed her. Her eyes peered half-fearfully into the future. It would be better if she died.

Lately he had several times hinted that perhaps it was time they thought of babies. That was because he stood next in succession to Alleyne, Laura knew. He must have an heir. Once she had longed to bear his child; now she put the thought from her. A child would tie them together so securely that she felt there could be no breaking that bond. A child, born of a loveless passion: she shivered. A child who would be thought of as the heir to great possessions: it could be none of hers. Another woman must give to Alleyne its heir; poor Laura Burton was not fit.

She became obsessed by the conviction that she must leave Hugh. In nothing was she of use to him. Her word carried no weight; she could not influence him even to the spending of less money. Marriage with him had meant no partnership; she had been only a plaything which he had coveted so much that he had paid a huge price to possess it. For a time he had thought his toy worth the price; then he had grown a little tired of it, and begun to wonder whether he had not paid too dearly for it.

She slid her wedding ring up and down her finger, twisting and turning it. What would be best for Hugh? That was the only question that troubled her now. No discussion with him was possible; it was not in his nature to be quite frank. Moreover he would

feel himself in honour bound to deny that his love for her was dying. He would pretend, and because he did not understand what love meant, he would think to deceive her by his pretence. He had said that he would never divorce her: she believed he was sincere in that. He wanted no more scandal in his life; more than that, he would shrink from letting the world know that this marriage everyone had condemned and he alone had upheld, was, after all, a failure.

She began to move about the room. People who wanted to end their lives put their heads in gas ovens. That would never do. It would be worse than divorce, far worse, since everyone would think she had done it because she had been miserable with Hugh.

Her thoughts were so centred upon Hugh that it was with an effort that she dragged them away to look into her own feelings. She did not think that she wanted to die; she was even afraid of death. People who committed suicide were eternally punished, she thought. It had an ugly sound: suicide. It frightened her; she found that her hands were trembling.

She forced herself to sit down again, to look quietly upon the future. These thoughts of death were so unlike the practical workings of her ordinary mind that she began to think herself unhinged. There was something melodramatic about it that disgusted her. She put it out of her mind, and tried to think of other, brighter things.

She had a visit from Mrs. Salinger a week later. Mrs. Salinger was fretful over pecuniary worries, and showed her claws a little. It had always annoyed her when Hugh capped her extravagancies with greater ones of his own, and she knew enough of expenditure to be sure that he was living now far beyond his income. She said with a faint smile: "I had hoped that you would have curbed Hugh's dreadful extravagance."

Laura flushed and answered: "I do try, Mrs. Salinger."

"You mustn't think that I blame you," Mrs. Salinger said, "but is it necessary for Hugh to run that expensive car? I say nothing about this flat, but I have always thought it ridiculous for you to live here. However, that is not my affair."

"I think so too, Mrs. Salinger." Laura found it hard to speak frankly to this exquisite, remote lady. "I'm afraid sometimes you've thought p'raps it was my doing that we spend so much money. I don't like to say this, but it isn't so. I've tried, and tried — " She broke off. This smacked too much of disloyalty.

"Surely I told you that I didn't blame you?" Mrs. Salinger said, raising her brows. "Hugh is terribly extravagant. I hoped only that you would influence him."

"It is — very difficult for me," Laura managed to say.

Mrs. Salinger looked into the fire. "Ah!" she said softly. She allowed a little sigh to escape her. Its implication was not lost on Laura. After a moment she continued: "Is not Hugh seeing a great deal of Merridew, and the rest of that set? He seems always to be with them. The pursuit of mere amusement," said Mrs. Salinger, who had never pursued anything else. "I have always felt that those very modern young people were no good to Hugh. If you were to try and get to know more people, dear Laura — the right sort . . . Hugh is of course accustomed to living with a woman who entertained a good deal, and he always met so many friends at home that perhaps he did not feel the necessity to seek amusement outside so much."

The claws were unsheathed. Laura looked into Mrs. Salinger's eyes. "P'raps you don't realize my position," she said quietly. "I don't think my friends would — amuse Hugh. And I don't get on with the people you know."

"Of course I realize the difficulties," Mrs. Salinger replied smoothly. "I am afraid I realized them long, long ago."

Laura clasped her hands on her knee. Her voice shook a little. "I don't mean to be rude, Mrs. Salinger, but you haven't tried to help me very much, have you?"

Mrs. Salinger remained cool and aloof. "My dear Laura, when Hugh went his own road without so much as telling me of his decision he cut himself off from me. I think you cannot accuse me of having made trouble in your life. I don't say that I was not terribly unhappy at Hugh's action; I had dreamed of a very different future for him. But he no doubt knows his own business best, and bitterly though I was disappointed I think you will agree that I have accepted the situation with a good grace."

"You've been very polite to me," Laura said. "I know that."

"I trust so, Laura. I hardly expected you to cherish a grievance against me, I must say. I suppose I cannot expect you to appreciate a mother's feelings, but I can assure you it was not easy for me to receive a daughter-in-law whom I had never met, of whom I knew nothing."

"I know," Laura said huskily. "I haven't a grievance. It's so hard to explain. P'raps I hoped you'd — be my friend, though why I should, I don't know, I'm sure. I do understand how you feel. Naturally you hoped Hughie'd marry someone — someone his own class. I'm sorry I spoke. Only somehow I thought things might have been different. . ." Her voice failed.

Mrs. Salinger began to put on her gloves. "Surely, Laura, nothing I could do would affect Hugh's and your life," she said. "If it is not a success I think you must not blame me."

Laura stood up. "I shouldn't, Mrs. Salinger," she

said with dignity. "If I've given you the impression Hugh and I aren't happy together it was wrong. You're making a mistake."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Mrs. Salinger. "And now I think I must be going home. It is later than I thought."

Laura did not offer to kiss her, or to shake hands.

Mrs. Salinger dined informally at Eaton Place that evening, and found Quillinan the only other guest. She had never been able to forgive him for his share in Hugh's marriage, and greeted him tonight with the gentle air of reproach she had assumed towards him ever since his return from the Riviera. Her conversation with Laura had brought Quillinan's iniquities into fresh prominence; when the servants had left the dining-room she steered the conversation towards Laura, and presently, fixing her eyes mournfully on Quillinan's face, she said: "I cannot be at ease concerning that unfortunate ménage. Hugh has changed under my very eyes."

"I hope he is becoming more stable," said Lady Powis, unimaginatively.

Mrs. Salinger ignored this contribution. "Hugh wanted so different a wife," she sighed.

"Evidence would seem to show that he did not," remarked Salinger. "Maurice, fill your glass and pass the decanter on."

"The fatal lure of a pretty face!" said Mrs. Salinger.

"Give Laura her due, Emmy, and say beautiful."

"If you admire that rather full-blown type, Charles."

"I do," he answered. "I always liked 'em full-blooded."

"Really, Charles!" Lady Powis looked severely across at him.

He picked up a salted almond, and ate it. "Never could stand flat-chested, under-sexed women," he said.

"I know your way of talking, Charles," Mrs. Salinger

said, smiling with an effort. "But I think you must agree that that figure is a wee bit common."

"I think it's ideal," he said blandly. "She isn't over-civilized like most of her generation. She doesn't fill her head with nonsense, and despise the physical side of life. She's a fine, primitive creature, and I've no doubt she'll give Hugh a quantity of lusty children, for which purpose she was obviously intended."

Mrs. Salinger cast a despairing glance towards her sister-in-law. For once Lady Powis responded. She rose ponderously from the table. "If you have finished, Emmeline, we will go into the drawing-room," she said.

Maurice shut the door behind them, and came back to the table. Salinger began to crack walnuts. "Two outraged matrons. Curious what a lot of delicate implications women'll stand. But speak out boldly, and — look at the result." He made a gesture towards the door. "Sit down, my boy. What's happened to set Emmy off again ?"

"I don't know," Quillinan said slowly. "Unless she feels that things aren't turning out successfully."

An eyebrow was cocked in his direction. "Aren't they ?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid not — sometimes."

"Joyce been making trouble ?"

"She never goes near South Audley Street as far as I know. No, it wouldn't be outside influences. Laura would rise above them, I believe."

"Getting profound, Maurice ?"

Quillinan laughed. "No. Mind if I speak plainly ?"

"I never mind anything."

"I wish you'd make it your business to mind Hugh, sir."

"My dear boy ! I ?"

"No, I know you won't. Daresay it wouldn't be any use if you did. It wasn't in Hugh."

Salinger refilled his glass. "I suppose you mean it

wasn't in him to rise above these difficulties? Have you taken all these years to realize that, Maurice?"

"I hoped when he fell in love with Laura it would be different. Of course I knew his weakness. But she's such a fine character — She's pure gold, you know, sir."

"Oh, unquestionably!" Salinger said airily. "But a little dull, do you not think?"

"Yes, judged by Hugh's standards."

Salinger chuckled. "Say by mine too, Maurice. Yes, I am afraid prolonged intercourse with her would bore me very much. Hugo has committed himself to a life of quite appalling dullness. I do not see that I can help him."

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Quillinan.

"Ah?" Salinger looked up with mild interest. "She finds him a little trying already? Yes, that was to be expected. She had better set about her very obvious function in life, and bear a child. She will probably transfer her affections to it."

"You don't know Laura if you think that, sir. Hugh's her whole life. She isn't the type of woman who gives her love easily, or withdraws it."

"I remember I warned her not to care too greatly," Salinger reflected. "Well, well! it is not, thank God, our affair."

"I feel I've got a certain amount of responsibility, sir. Had I advised it she would have given Hugh up."

"Is that so?" Salinger inclined his head with that faint air of interest. "On the whole I think it was a pity you did not advise it, Maurice."

Quillinan was silent.

"A certain amount of — let us say, philosophic detachment would be necessary in a man married to Laura," said Salinger. "Hugo never had that. He cares absurdly about the opinion of the world. I imagine he writhes when Laura betrays herself. His dis-

comfort is generally quite obvious, and communicates itself to others. But he is really behaving with amazing rectitude. One wonders how long it will last."

"He leaves her alone too much."

"My dear Maurice, a man cannot live in his wife's pocket."

"Perhaps not, but don't you see that Laura has only him? Other women have friends of their own, and interests of their own. He wants her to have his friends, and — well, they haven't admitted her into the circle of intimacy. And Hugh won't chuck them for her sake. He's beginning to accept invitations that don't include her."

"Sometimes," said Salinger, "it appears to me that there are no manners left in England. This is all very deplorable, Maurice. Who are these people who invite Hugh without his wife?"

"Does it matter? The Hopes are some of them. All done quite politely, you know. Laura doesn't hunt; they feel sure she would be bored. That type of thing. Some of the exotic crowd don't trouble to invent excuses. That's Hugh's lot at the moment. God knows what he sees in them. A noxious crowd, for the most part."

Salinger leaned back in his chair. "Ah yes! The bright young people whom Laura naïvely refers to as the Smart Set." He shook with gentle laughter. "But she would not wish to be with them, Maurice."

"Then Hugh should give them up. They're utterly worthless anyway."

Salinger smiled, and rose. "Possibly he will at some time or another realize that he is making a mistake in trying to introduce Laura into his set," he remarked. "Meanwhile, my dear Maurice, there is nothing for you or me to do."

Salinger did not know that Hugh had already reached this realization. Only a certain defiance had kept him

from admitting it. It would be ignominious to withdraw; it meant failure to thrust Laura into his world. He had failed. In the still, small hours that knowledge crept in on him, and brought with it a grim sense of defeat. He seemed to himself to be too tired to go on struggling, too tired even to wonder whose was the blame. He supposed vaguely that it was his for having married Laura. He had made a fool of himself, and for the sake of a little spell of bliss he had deliberately spoiled his life.

It was no use thinking that he had not spoiled it. These months in England had ripped the veil from before his eyes. He struggled to maintain his place in his chosen society, struggled to drag Laura with him, and, when this attempt failed, struggled to reconcile his duty to her with his inclination to live his old life.

His duty . . . He pondered the words. There was a time when he would not have considered her in that light. But the past, that past which held a white house in Italy, with a garden meant for lovers, had fled and he could not recapture it.

He was sick with disgust at himself that he should prove so fickle. Sometimes the sight of Laura exasperated him, or the sound of her voice. When she talked of the small nothings that interested her, he sat chafing, involuntarily picturing another woman in her place; when she tried so painstakingly to be interested in the things that made up his world he wanted to snap at her to stop the lamentable farce. He never did so; he tried to be patient, to teach her. But he had grown so weary of correcting and instructing that his whole being ached for a wife who stood in no need of correction.

They had their moments of bliss still, but he thought even these were tinged with bitterness. He wondered whether she too found it so. He thought not; he was so careful not to give a sign of his love's waning, so careful always to kiss her when he came in, to bring her

flowers, to pretend an interest in her day's doings. Since it was not given to him to love as she loved he did not know that these outward signs could not deceive her. She never allowed him to see her sadness, and since she turned to him a smiling face he did not dream the desolation in her heart.

That she was often made unhappy by her inability to mix with his friends, he knew. He knew also that when he was away the sun went down for her. Uneasily he began to count over the times he had been absent from her of late. There had been week-ends in Leicestershire, little dinners with old friends, visits to Hurlingham. . . And had he enjoyed them ? He had gone in a spirit of pleasure-seeking, but the taste of it was dusty in his mouth. He had tried to keep up with his friends, but the very fact of his marriage had rendered all these efforts fruitless. He had dropped out.

There was nothing for it then but to accept his fate. He looked with alien eyes at Laura, saw her through the long years growing gradually older, stouter, more placid, until a day would dawn when she would no longer have even a sexual appeal for him. He supposed he would grow accustomed to his lot, perhaps grow old and dull with her. That, then, was the end of his dreams, and his ambitions.

Listlessly he decided that it would be better to give up the flat. He did not think he could live in town any longer. Perhaps they might retire to the country, or perhaps return to Italy. He did not know, hardly cared. He tried to picture himself back in the white house outside Siena, tried to conjure up the image of that scented past; he could only see a crushing boredom ahead of him.

At last, in the spring, he broached the matter to Laura. He said: "God, another bill ! Laura, should you mind if we gave up this flat ?"

"No, I'd be glad," she said instantly.

He was turning some papers over in a drawer of his desk. "I've been thinking that we might let it furnished for a bit, and go down to Alleyne. I've had the most sickening run of luck ever since Christmas, and it seems to me the moment to cut down expenses."

"You mean — horse — racing?" she asked. "Oh Hughie! I wish you'd give it up!"

"I probably shall," he said evenly.

She was watching him, springing halfway to catch at his underlying meaning. But she said nothing.

"Would you like to go back to Italy?" he asked abruptly.

Her hands moved impulsively towards him, and fell again. For a moment the black and flame drawing-room vanished, and she could see wistaria against a white wall. The vision faded. Hugh had not seen this, had not heard the call of a singing fountain, not smelled the warm scent of mimosa. "Do you want to go back?" she said.

"I asked you."

She controlled her unsteady voice. "We were so happy there," she said.

He moved towards her, patted her shoulder. "I know. Well, let's go back."

Her eyes searched his face, and read there all that he tried to hide from her. "I don't think we'd better, Hughie."

"Why not?"

"Well, your place is in England, dearie. It wouldn't be right, and I wouldn't be happy, not when I knew we were doing wrong."

"We'll go into it all thoroughly later," he said. "Perhaps we might live in the country. We'd have to decide at our leisure. We'll go down to Alleyne first anyway."

"You don't feel inclined to take a cheaper flat, Hughie?"

"No. Not yet. To be quite honest, my dear, we haven't made much of a success of living in London, have we ?" He smiled at her as he said it, but there was a bitter note in his voice.

She took his hand in hers. "I see. Very well, dear, we'll let the flat, and then see how we feel about — everything."

"Sure you don't mind ?"

"Oh no !" She looked round her with a half-smile. "It hasn't really been home, has it ? We'll look for a little house in the country and make a proper home of it." She held his hand closer a minute, and then released it. "Well, now I have got something to think about, and no mistake !" she said cheerfully. "Won't it be fun, looking for a house, Hughie ?"

"Great fun," he answered mechanically.

CHAPTER XX

"CERTAINLY *come down to Alleyne,*" wrote Salinger. "*I shall be charmed to have Laura back again. Give her my love, and tell her her car awaits her.*"

"How kind he is!" Laura said. "And he can't really like having us planted on him indefinitely. We'll try and find a house as soon as we can, won't we, Hugh?"

"I still think we should be better off abroad," he said. "We might winter in Rome, and then see how we feel."

"Hughie, what about your hunting?" she said. "You enjoy it so. Do you want to give it up?"

He turned away. "I don't mind," he said in a flat voice.

"And your friends . . . ?"

He said nothing, nor even looked at her. She thought: "It's for me, he's sacrificing these things." Aloud she said: "Well, we'll see. But about Alleyne, Hughie — Isn't your sister there?"

"She's going to stay with the Craddocks," said Hugh shortly. Joyce's obstinate refusal to accept Laura was one of many wounds.

Laura was careful to say no more. She set about her preparations for leaving the flat.

At Alleyne Lady Powis received them unemotionally. To Laura, after a couple of days, she said: "I do not in the least understand this new fad of Hugh's. He tells me you are going to winter in Italy."

"Yes," said Laura. "We always promised ourselves we'd go back."

"It seems to me a very odd idea," said Lady Powis.

"He spoke of taking a house there. He cannot seriously propose to live abroad, surely ?"

"Oh, we've decided nothing yet !" Laura said lightly.

"Then I trust you will set your face against it. Hugh may like to think that he is fitted for a life of seclusion, but nothing is further from the truth. I have known him since the day he was born, and I can assure you, Laura, that he would be tired of such a life in a very short while."

Laura answered evasively. She was no longer afraid of Lady Powis; she was scarcely oppressed by the atmosphere of Alleyne. She seemed to herself to be moving far apart from the Salingers; she had never been so calm or so natural. Small external troubles had no power to worry her. She thought: "I shall soon be out of it."

She was definitely acting a part now, showing a false face to Hugh and to Hugh's people. Not one of them, looking into her smiling face, and hearing her cheerful voice, guessed at the load of unhappiness and fear she carried. They were not meant to know; they were to believe her happy in the prospect of returning to Italy. This was her alibi. Perhaps Stella was not deceived, but Stella's visits to Alleyne were infrequent. She came occasionally, also to allay suspicion, but she avoided intercourse with Laura.

Laura wrote to her mother and to Gladys from time to time, letters that cost her hours of careful re-writing. Only then did her mask slip, and while her pen traced happy sentences, the tears rolled down her cheeks. She had cut herself off from them, and the comfort of Mrs. Burton's motherly arms was denied her. Above all the Burtons were not to guess. . .

She was standing now quite alone, since she must shut even Hugh out from her secret. She felt unlike herself, remote, with a thin crust of cheerfulness hiding her desolation and her fear. She kissed Hugh, let him put his arms about her, and knew with a sense of loneliness

that made her very soul shake, that he did not divine the misery beneath her pitiful mask of pretence. He was relieved to see her in such good spirits, and too preoccupied with his own troubles, to probe deeper. Under his rather absent caresses her need of him leaped up, and her shrinking, loving self yearned to sob out all the heartbreak and the nightmares on his shoulder. She had to draw herself away from him to prevent the impulse. To do it might be to revive for a while his love, since his protective pity would be roused. But she knew that it would be no more than the last flicker of a fire that was dying.

He spoke of their future, with an effort, she thought. She, who knew that never again would she see the land of her brief happiness, said: "Won't it be fun? You don't know how I'm looking forward to it." The words sounded so strangely unnatural to her that for a moment she was afraid he would see through them. But he did not. He said no more; she knew that he was postponing their departure because he had no desire to leave England. His heaviness of heart was so apparent to her that she ached to take his dear head in her arms, pillowing it on her breast, and to kiss his eyelids, and his crisp hair, to whisper: "Don't worry, my dear, my dear! I'll make it all right for you. Only don't look so tired and wretched! It will all come right. . ." So might a mother comfort her child, but Laura would only say it in her heart, since he must never guess . . .

Return to Italy! She could almost have laughed at the blindness of these people who thought she wanted that. Let them think it; let them think her as blind as they were themselves. They were playing her game for her, all-unconscious. She thought how shocked they would be if they knew what her plans were. Polite visitors would sometimes turn to her, and say: "And what are your plans, Mrs. Salinger?" While her lips framed a lying answer her brain wondered what consternation

would be written on those placid faces were she to reply: "I am planning to kill myself."

Probably however they would think it some sort of a joke. Certainly it had so bizarre and ghoulish a sound that they might be forgiven for thinking so.

She was unable to contemplate it either as tragedy, or as sin. For her it was the only way out. She knew it was wicked, but if it gave Hugh back his freedom surely, surely God would forgive? On her knees beside her bed she prayed to the implacable God of her religion. "It isn't for myself. It isn't because I can't bear it any longer. It's for him. It's because I took his life that day in Nice, thinking I could make him happy. And I can't, and the only thing I can do for him now is to give him back his life. If I could think of another way I'd take it, but you know there isn't a way. Oh, dear God, help me to make it right for him!"

In another, less stern mood, thinking with dilating eyes on the horror of her decision she would clutch at hope, tell herself she was exaggerating, behaving like a hysterical fool. Hugh was paying no more than the price of folly. He loved her still, in his way.

She pressed her fingers to her temples, pushing up the heavy locks of her hair. "That's being a coward. Clinging to him when I know it's over. Go with him away from here? Back again — us two alone. Pull him down . . . separate him from his home, his friends . . . let him sacrifice all those things that he loves for me, whom he doesn't love any longer. No. No. It's better to do myself in, so's he'll never know. Now, while he still cares a little. Go right out of his life. Stop messing it up like I am doing."

The thought, rather the hope, that her death would make him unhappy, pushed itself forward. She looked at it with queer bitterness. Yes, he would be unhappy — for a little while, but later how thankful he would be that he was no longer tied to her!

Salinger, alone of the household, saw the haggard expression in her eyes. Once he said: "You don't look altogether well, my dear."

"Well, I have been a bit off-colour," she said, with a cool readiness that surprised herself. "I'll be all right in a day or two. Don't you start worrying Hughie about it, now, will you ?"

"I should imagine that he must see for himself."

"All men aren't observant like you are, Uncle Charles," she said.

But this unlooked for perception in him alarmed her. Would he guess ? She went over her plan again, with a methodical thoroughness that sprang from a mind so overwrought that it had become almost callous. She might have been planning the plot of a story, so detached was her outlook.

On Thursday Hugh was going to town, for some dinner: she had forgotten what. He would go up early in the day, and spend the night there. She would do it while he was away; she did not want him to see her just afterwards, in case she looked — ugly. His people would have time to soften the shock for him.

It was a clever plan, she thought. Anxiously she sought for a flaw in it. First she would ask Stella to come to tea with her. That would be a good alibi. Then, when Hugh had gone, she would discover a need to match some silk in Midhurst, or some such thing. They were all of them in the habit of running into Midhurst to do shopping. No one would think it strange. She would drive there, and buy the silk — it would never do to forget that — and turn the car for home. Not a mile from Alleyne rose the steep hill up from the village, the road that turned at right angles at the foot, where the old brick wall cut across it. She would have to come down to reach Alleyne. How many times had Hugh compelled her to change down before she attempted the descent ! He was afraid of that hill; he

told her of grim accidents there had happened upon it. She remembered one, of a man who had missed his change. The car had got out of control, his brakes had not availed to stop it, and at the bend it had turned over, pinning him beneath it. He had not died. No, but she would choose a surer method. Supposing that instead of braking she even hurried the car down that hill, and drove it straight, straight for the wall at the foot? She had learned enough to be very sure that she would have no chance of life. The steering wheel would smash in her chest; it would be all over in just one rending moment, and who would dream that she had done it deliberately? Not Hugh, not his mother, not Lady Powis, not the Burtons.

There she paused. There was Salinger to be reckoned with. He was acute, uncannily acute. Yet even if he suspected, would he speak his suspicion? She was very sure that he would not. Whatever his private suspicions he might be counted on to hush up the whole affair.

There was Quillinan. He might also suspect. She frowned over that. If he did it could be but a secret thought, and it would not be like him to stir up trouble for the Salingers upon such slight grounds. Even if he felt convinced that it was no accident, she had planned it all so carefully that his mouth would be shut by the absence of all evidence.

Last of those who might guess the truth was Stella. Guess? She would know, deep in her heart, but she would keep silence for Hugh's sake, and because of the bond that she had acknowledged to lie between herself and Laura. She would never speak; she would go to her grave with that secret, terrible knowledge locked away in her heart. Laura's lips curved in a slow, mirthless smile. It would be a load for Stella to bear, an awful load, but Laura did not care. Stella too must suffer

in love's cause. Laura thought she would not shrink from it.

She lived through the days that separated her from Thursday like one in a queer trance. An automaton moved, and smiled, and spoke; the living woman was hidden behind the mask, and only occasionally peeped out of the back of those steady, glorious eyes. The automaton said: "Yes, I'd love some grapes, please." The living woman thought: "How'll I bear it? Not to see him again. Not even to kiss him good-bye . . . Will it hurt very much? . . . Will God forgive me, let me into Heaven, p'raps, one day, to meet Hughie again?"

"You will spend Easter in Rome, no doubt? That will amuse you, my dear."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it awfully, Uncle Charles."

"Oh, are you going abroad again, Mrs. Salinger? I did not know that."

She looked across at Mrs. Crawfurd. "Yes. We hope to — a little later on. I haven't ever been to Rome. Seems funny, really, considering what a time we spent in Italy, but there it is."

Later, in their bedroom, Hugh said: "Laura, how many times am I to tell you not to say 'there it is'? I do wish you'd make an effort to remember."

"Did I say it?" She looked desolately across at him. "I'm sorry, dear. I didn't think, I expect. Don't — don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," he said. "If I can't point these things out to you in a perfectly quiet, reasonable way without creating a scene — "

Her hands fluttered on his arm; she forced a smile. "I'm not making a scene. I'm sorry, dear. I'll try and — remember." The words stuck in her throat.

"I wish you would," he said. "And don't keep on

saying 'you're very kind' to people. It's entirely unnecessary." He looked at her quivering face. "Oh, Laura, don't make a tragedy of it!" he said wearily. "All right, I unsay it. Forget it! Say what seems good to you. There!" He kissed her perfunctorily. "Not going to be silly, are you?"

She hid her face against his shoulder for a moment. "Of course not." Her hands touched his coat as though they would cling to him, and then fell away. "I'm only a bit tired," she said.

Thursday came. Hugh could not find a certain pair of links. "Laura, didn't you pack them with the others when we came down here? Where the hell things get to beats me!"

She found them, packed them away in a little box, with his studs.

"Oh, don't bother, darling!" Hugh said, seeing her on her knees before his suitcase. "I'll do it."

"I want to. Let me! Let me pack for you!" She was aware of the throbbing urgency in her voice, and pressed her hand to her mouth, choking back all sound.

He had his back to her, and did not see. "It's very nice of you, my dear. Have you put in my patent-leather shoes?"

"Yes," she said. "And your black socks. Let me fold your coat, dearie. You know I do it all right, now don't I?"

"Much better than I do," he agreed.

Carefully, lovingly she smoothed the coat, and folded it so that there should not be a crease. Too soon the suitcase was ready, and locked. Hugh glanced at his wristwatch. "Damn! I shall be late. Promised to lunch with Merridew. I must fly." He caught up the suitcase, and put his arm quickly round her shoulder for a hurried embrace. "Take care of yourself, old thing. Back sometime tomorrow."

Something seemed to snap in her. She held him

strained against her, her lips were on his mouth, hard-pressed. She felt as though she could never let him go.

He returned her kiss, but his mind was on his appointment. "I must fly," he repeated.

Her arms fell away from him. Had he had time to notice her he must have seen how deathly pale she was. "Good-bye," she said, "good-bye, my dear one."

"Don't get into mischief while I'm away!" he said gaily, and on that jest was gone.

She stood where he had left her, gazing towards the door. Her hand crept to her throat. She heard his retreating step on the stair, his voice raised in the hall. Still she stayed, as though turned to stone. Faintly there came to her the whirr of a self-starter, the throb of an engine, and then the scrunch of gravel under the car wheels.

Her voice tore itself from her. "Hughie!" It smote against the wall of silence. "Hughie! Hughie!" She stumbled towards the door, and then, as though realizing the futility of it, stood still, swaying, hiding her face.

A step sounded outside. There was a knock on the door. "Did you call, Laura?" said Lady Powis. "I thought I heard you call Hugh. He has gone."

Laura raised her head; jerked back by this matter-of-fact voice. Her lips felt stiff but she formed them to say: "Yes. I thought he had left his — his razor strop behind. That was all. A mistake."

Lady Powis went away. Laura put out a groping hand for the support of the bed, and fell across it, half-fainting.

How long she lay in this state of semi-consciousness she did not know. She was roused by the chime of a gong. The agony had passed, leaving a curious sense of numbness. She got up, and walked slowly into her bathroom to wash her face and her hands. She looked at her reflection in the glass with a considering, absorbed

stare. She was too pale. She must rub her cheeks hard to bring a little colour into them. She went back to her room, and chose a hat with a brim, and pulled it on. "And a coat," she thought. "Not that lovely fur coat. It would be such a pity . . ." She pulled a tweed coat from the wardrobe and went downstairs.

Lady Powis noted the hat and coat with surprise. "Are you going out, Laura ? Did you not tell me that Stella was coming to tea ?"

"Oh, I'll be back in time !" Laura said. "I do want to match that silk for my work. I'd have gone this morning only that I wanted to get Hughie off."

"Are you going to Midhurst ?" Lady Powis shook out her napkin. "Then I wonder whether you would call in at Croker's, and ask them if they have not mended my watch yet. It is ridiculous the time they are taking."

"Do you want the car, Laura ?" inquired Salinger. "Or are you going to drive yourself ?"

"Yes, please," Laura said. "I mean, I'd much rather drive myself."

"Just as you like, my dear."

Lunch came at last to an end. Salinger remarked that Laura had no appetite. She confessed to a slight headache, but thought that the open air would do it good.

She buttoned the coat up to her throat, put on her gloves. "You said Croker's, didn't you, Lady Powis ?"

"Yes, my dear. Tell them I am most displeased at the time they have taken. You will not be late for tea ?"

"Oh no !" Laura said.

She went out to the garage, and got into the little car. She did not once look back at Alleyne. Not there lay her dead dreams.

She did not seem able to think very clearly on that drive to Midhurst. She was careful not to look at the

wall at the foot of the hill, but as the car laboured up she thought how fast it would come down an hour hence. She had only to keep her foot off the brake; it would not be necessary to press down the accelerator.

She reached the top, and a moment later passed the gates of the Hepplewhites' house. She settled down for the drive to Midhurst.

She was very careful over the matching of her silk. A still small voice in her brain asked: "What is the use ?" but it seemed to have no bearing on the situation. She went to Croker's. He had Lady Powis' watch ready, and gave it her with many apologies for his tardiness. Laura would have liked to tell him to send the watch. It seemed so dreadful to take it with her on this journey. She supposed it would be smashed into smithereens. How cross Lady Powis would be ! The car too: she was glad it was not a new car; glad for the first time that Salinger considered it her own. Still, it was awful to smash it up, ruin it for ever. She hoped Salinger would not mind. Knowing him, she did not think that he would.

She was back in the car, driving through the town. A lorry came out of a side turning, without warning and of instinct she swerved, and shot forward, clearing it by inches. It had given her quite a start, shaken off some of her numbness.

She began to laugh suddenly, low, helpless laughter. "If that's not like me — swerving to avoid that lorry when I mean to smash myself up on this trip." She went on laughing, then caught her breath on a choking sob. "Getting hysterical. Better shut up." She found that she was speaking aloud.

She fixed her eyes on the road ahead. Up this hill, round to the left, then right again . . . She hoped they would not let Hugh see her if the glass cut her face. He would not be able to forget that. She wanted him to remember only her beauty. Perhaps they would

bandage her face. It was no good worrying over it, anyway. If God was merciful it would be quickly over.

Fear surged up in her; she put the car along faster. She mustn't think of that part of it; she must fix her mind on Hugh. He would not have to give up his hunting after all, or his friends. After the first unhappiness that little crease would go from between his eyes. It had not been there when first she had met him. Perhaps he would go away for a bit to get over it. Her heart went out to him as she thought of the sorrow that would surely come to him. She would have spared him that had it been possible. But better a short sorrow than a long bitterness. There would be people to help him, to comfort, and when it was over so many things to fill his life.

The car sped on. Her eyes fell on the clock on the dashboard. It was nearly four already; she had been longer in Midhurst than she thought. The end was drawing very close now. There was a queer noise in her head; it was unpleasant, like an insistent humming; well, it would soon stop.

The last corner was turned; she saw the hill dip before her, and her foot pressed the accelerator a final time. The car seemed to leap forward; wind rushed in her face; she found it difficult to breathe. Her hands were tight clenched on the wheel. The car was gathering speed; she thought it would be almost impossible to stop it now.

Someone was walking down the hill; she hoped that whoever it was would draw in to the side of the road. It was so hard to keep the wheels straight.

The solitary figure became more distinct, turned in alarm at the noise of the car hurtling down. Laura caught a fleeting glimpse of Stella Hepplewhite's face. Their eyes surely met, Stella's in widening horror. Then the car had swept past, and Stella was left behind.

Laura forced her mind to the task of holding the

car on a straight course. Did Stella scream? She could not be sure.

The wall seemed to spring up before her, towering, cruel. Her hands left the wheel; with a cry she flung herself sideways, trying to shield her face. Somewhere, quite close, she was aware of the sweet scent of mimosa. . .

She was still living when they picked her up, still living when the doctor came, with Salinger and Lady Powis on his heels.

"She is unconscious," the doctor said in a low voice. "Can Hugh be fetched?"

"Penny is trying to get him." To Stella crouched in the window the voice sounded unlike Salinger's. "Is she — ?"

There was a murmur of voices. Stella heard Salinger say sharply: "My God! Can nothing be done?"

Lady Powis was wringing her hands, startled tears in her eyes.

Stella raised her head from her sheltering hands.

"You here, Stella?"

She looked uncomprehendingly at Salinger. "I saw it," she said. "I saw it." Her eyes stole to the bed. Laura lay still and very pale, with blood on her cheek.

"Oh, my dear child!" Lady Powis moved towards her, put an arm round her waist. She herself was shaken, and crying.

"Where is Hugh?" asked Dr. James.

"In town," Salinger said bitterly. "Is there any hope of her lasting — ?" He broke off. Laura's eyes had opened.

The doctor stepped softly to the bed; the eyes wandered past him. They were bewildered, faintly frowning. They did not seem to see Salinger, or his sister, but they came to rest on Stella, and their expression changed, and grew compelling. In obedience to their summons Stella went forward, falteringly.

"I think she wants to say something," murmured the doctor. "Try and control yourself. Don't distress her." He moved away a little.

Stella laid her shaking hand on Laura's, that lay so limply beside her. "Dear Laura — I am here," she said unsteadily.

There was a slight pressure from Laura's fingers. Her lips moved; Stella knelt beside her, to catch the faint whisper: "It was an accident."

Stella's tears fell fast. "Laura, Laura!"

Laura's eyes were on her face. "An accident. Say it."

Stella stared down at her, pressing her free hand to her mouth. "I — can't!"

Still the eyes compelled. Stella bent and kissed Laura's hand. "It was an accident," she whispered, and broke into helpless sobs.

Someone lifted her up. Laura's tired eyes had closed again. Lady Powis held Stella in her arms, and said: "Try and calm yourself, my dear. Quiet, now — quite quiet."

The doctor's fingers were on Laura's wrist. He looked significantly at Salinger. Laura's eyes opened once more; she turned her head, and they saw that she was smiling. "Oh, the mimosa!" she said, quite clearly. "Hughie dear, our house of dreams! . . ."